

# cineACTION!

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Neglected films of the '80s



# CineAction!

## No. 1, Spring 1985

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Front cover: Linda Manz in *Out of the Blue*  
Back cover: *Beat Street*



**Daryl Hannah and Rutger Hauer as the rebel replicants Pris and Roy in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*.**

THIS IS THE FIRST ISSUE of a magazine whose aim is to provide, within the field of film criticism, alternatives to what is generally available. We want to steer a course between, on the one hand, the practice of journalist reviewing (the expression of personal opinions within an entertainment format) and, on the other, academic "criticism" of a certain type (detached from contemporary social realities and frequently inaccessible to the uninitiated). Crucial to our project is the one thing shared by an otherwise heterogeneous group of editors and contributors: a commitment to radical social/political positions—Marxism/socialism, feminism, gay liberation. We hope that this commitment will give our work its force and focus. Especially, we aim to produce responsible and stimulating critical work with a basis in cultural theory and concern with the social/political climate. The current massive swing to the right makes it increasingly urgent to sustain the radical impulses and movements that developed in the '60s and '70s.

We intend to address a wide spectrum of filmic modes

ranging from the mainstream to the avant-garde including alternative cinemas. We hope to devote future issues to such topics as the woman-centred melodrama, screwball comedy, film noir, and current trends in the European art film. As film remains one of the most powerful forms of communication through the construction of images and narrative, a consistent concern will be the problems that have arisen in recent debates about the cinema, concerning the relationship between aesthetics and ideology.

The first issue is devoted to a number of 'neglected' films of the past few years whose neglect is, in our view, partly explainable in terms of their problematic nature in relation to the dominant tendencies of current cinema. We hope to make this a regular feature of the magazine, discussing one such neglected film in each issue. In close association with the magazine, we are planning to produce, annually, a journal engaging more directly and explicitly with the theoretical issues that structure our critical approach.

—The CineAction! collective

# 80s Hollywood: Dominant Tendencies

by Robin Wood

**T**HE GREATER PART OF THIS ISSUE IS DEVOTED TO the evaluation of recent films we feel have been neglected, unjustly dismissed, or denied any serious consideration. Though there may be a variety of reasons for the neglect (we are not claiming that all these films are masterpieces!), one in particular interests us: our sense that the films we have chosen are in various ways and to various degrees *oppositional*: that, whether or not this was the conscious intention of their makers, they run counter to the dominant tendencies of Hollywood cinema in the Reagan era. It seems appropriate, then, in order to provide a context for the articles that follow, to set out clearly and simply what those 'dominant tendencies' are.

One may begin by suggesting which films embody them, and the prime criterion must be popularity. The resulting list may look at first sight bewilderingly heterogeneous, both in kind and quality, but it reveals on closer inspection a remarkable underlying consistency (it is not, of course, meant to be exhaustive): the *Star Wars* series; Spielberg's movies, especially *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *E.T.*; the *Rocky* series; the 'mad slasher' film inaugurated by *Halloween* but best represented by *Friday the 13th* and its progeny; the high school/college movies, of which *Porky's* is the salient example; *Ordinary People*, *On Golden Pond*, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *Terms of Endearment*. What have all these in common? They are, *almost* without exception, reassuring (the one apparent anomaly, the 'mad slasher' movies, will be dealt with later) and, *absolutely* without exception, extremely reactionary, politically, socially, morally.

One possible objection must be met immediately: that the commercial success of a film today depends on marketing, and that most of the films discussed in this issue are relatively modest works that received little promotion and in some cases were 'thrown away' by their studios and distributors. The former assertion really does not stand up: it has been proved again and again that, while elaborate publicity campaigns can draw crowds in for a few days, the public cannot be 'sold' a film it does not wish to see. One can point to a number (admittedly small—it is obvious that very few distinguished *major* works have been produced by Hollywood during the past few

years, probably fewer than in any previous period of its history) of films that were given lavish advance publicity and (to varying degrees) failed at the box office despite it: *Raging Bull* and *King of Comedy*, *Heaven's Gate*, *Blade Runner*, *Blow Out*. What is striking about this small group is that all the films that compose it deny their audiences the easy satisfactions of reassurance and the restoration of the 'good old values' of patriarchal capitalism.

## From Vietnam to Reagan

Two events mark a watershed in the recent history of American culture: the end of the Vietnam war, and the sealing over, the 'forgetting,' of Watergate. The culmination of the movement of American culture since those events is the Reagan landslide in the 1984 election. Andrew Britton's phrase 'Reaganite entertainment,' to sum up the typical Hollywood products of this period, is certainly useful, so long as it is remembered that the seminal works—*Star Wars*, *Rocky*, *Halloween*—were all released before Reagan was first elected. They are part of that huge communal sigh of relief, marked initially by the advent of the Carter administration, that anticipated Reaganism and the full restoration of the 'Law of the Father.'

For Vietnam and Watergate did not undermine confidence merely in a single government, but in the entire dominant ideology, centred upon patriarchal law; the crisis in ideological confidence permeated every level, calling into question the authority, not only of the symbolic fathers (government, President, police, organized religion), but of the literal father within the patriarchal nuclear family and of the internalized 'father' installed within us from early childhood, the guarantor of our conformity to the established societal norms, to which Freud gave the name Superego. Hence the period saw, not just the anti-war protest movement, but the hippy movement and the rapid development of more permanent, more radical, more powerfully threatening movements already existing in embryo: feminism, gay liberation, black militancy: all overt and potent challenges to the 'Law of the Father.' Hollywood, committed to providing entertainment for general audiences, was totally unable to cope adequately with any of this, yet it responded with a number of confused, disturbing and disturbed, anti-Establishment

movies made possible by the fact that disillusionment and desperation had become popular. The careers of Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, Michael Cimino and Brian De Palma all either began or flourished during this period; it was also, significantly, the great era of the American horror film, in which minor artists like George Romero, Larry Cohen, Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper, were able to produce distinguished work. The (comparative, never uncompromised) radicalism of Hollywood in the late '60s and through the '70s proved, however, extremely vulnerable: incoherent, characterized by despair rather than any positive revolutionary impulse, it lacked the structure of a constructive social/political alternative to give it support, clarity and stamina. The period within which the dominant ideology *almost* disintegrated swiftly (virtually overnight) gave way to the period in which it has been most insistently (which does not necessarily mean convincingly) reasserted.

## The '80s

It remains to specify the components of the 'dominant tendencies.' They can be, for convenience and clarity, offered as a list, though it must be stressed (and will anyway quickly become obvious) that they are really inseparable, all interacting.

1. *The Restoration of the Father.* This is clearly the master-tendency, upon which all the rest are dependent: the guarantee of reassurance is the restoration of patriarchal authority, which all those 'good old values' were elaborated to serve, reinforce and perpetuate. Hence the quite extraordinary number of movies whose project is the reaffirmation of the *literal* father: *The Great Santini*, *Tribute*, *Middle Age Crazy*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Author! Author!*, *Ordinary People*. Some of the films present the father as unsatisfactory, even monstrous, but he must nonetheless finally be accepted and venerated—merely because he is the father. In retrospect, one can see that the entire *Star Wars* trilogy moves ineluctably towards the culmination of *Return of the Jedi*: Luke Skywalker backed by no less than three father-figures (plus celebratory fireworks-display): the redeemed Darth Vader, Obi One and Yoda. The film can be read as the *Ordinary People* of Outer Space, with Darth Vader as Donald Sutherland and Obi One and Yoda doubling as the psychiatrist. The 'father' of course does not have to be literal: a father-figure will do. *Tender Mercies* is a case in point, but there is also *E.T.*, in which the scientist ('Keys'), initially sinister, ultimately revealed as benevolent, and, finally, E.T. himself, double as father-figures. (Spielberg's presentation of E.T. is shamelessly opportunistic—the innocuous little rubber alien occupies, from moment to moment, whatever position is convenient to the manipulations of the narrative—but the paternal nature of his farewell is obvious).

2. *The Oedipal Trajectory.* The restoration of the father is necessarily accompanied by the 'coming to manhood' of the future father, the son (in the overwhelming majority of cases, the crux of the film is the father's relationship with a *male* child). It is not enough simply to reinstate patriarchy: its continuance must be guaranteed. According to Freud, the male child's working-through of the castration complex involves acceptance of the father, identification with the father, and the understanding that he will one day in his turn *become* the father. In the cinema, *Bambi* might be considered the *locus classicus* of this process, and all the '80s films considered here essentially repeat the itinerary of Disney's film: the films that '80s audiences, who appear to regard themselves as so sophisticated, are applauding are in effect remakes of *Bambi*.

3. *Expulsion of the Mother/Subordination of the Wife.* Given the overwhelming Oedipal/patriarchal nature of '80s cinema, it is logical that women have only two possible roles (and that they are really the same role, as 'father' and 'son' are really the same), those which the 'good old values' of patriarchy have always assigned them:

Mother and Wife. Anyone who doubts that this is the most reactionary period in the entire history of Hollywood might care to ponder the total absence from our cinema of any equivalent for the women's roles (never uncompromised, but always challenging and disturbing) associated with Dietrich, Garbo, Hepburn, Davis, Crawford, Stanwyck. A number of the films register (without criticizing) the ignominy of the mother's role within the patriarchal order: that, once the Oedipal trajectory has been completed and the identification with the father achieved, she is entirely dispensable and something of an encumbrance. Hence the failure of Mary Tyler Moore's efforts in *Ordinary People* to assert that she retains *some* rights as a person: she can simply be evicted from the narrative, leaving the son (who has by now acquired his own young woman, suitably supportive and compliant) to enjoy his reconciliation with Dad in peace, without uncalled for interference. The project of *Kramer Vs. Kramer* is essentially to show that the Oedipal trajectory can be speeded up: the son/father identification needn't be postponed till adolescence, and the father can meanwhile be a mother too. There, at least, Meryl Streep's performance (like Mary Tyler Moore's in *Ordinary People*) is permitted to introduce a certain disturbance; it is the function of *Author! Author!* to rectify this, demonstrating that women are either so stupid (Tuesday Weld) or so unreasonable (Dyan Cannon) that we really shouldn't worry about their feelings at all. And *Return of the Jedi*—indeed, the whole trilogy—dispenses with the Mother altogether (unless one detects her disguised as the evil Emperor, whose resemblance to the witch in *Snow White* has been much remarked, in which case her expulsion from the narrative is even more brutal than Mary Tyler Moore's). Doubtless the rejection by the public of *King of Comedy* (one of the only great American films of the past three years) can be explained, at least on the unconscious level, by the fact that it subjects the Oedipal trajectory to, not only criticism, but ridicule: singlemindedly concerned with the efforts of the 'son' (Robert De Niro) to achieve identification with the 'father' (Jerry Lewis), it is the perfect radical antidote to the complicity and complacency of *Ordinary People*.

The position accorded the Wife (more precisely, wife-to-be, the 'heroine' whose union with the hero at the end of the film guarantees the future of the heterosexual couple and the patriarchal family) is only superficially less ignominious. In deference to the simpler levels of the women's movement (the levels available for popular consumption without danger of indigestion) she is permitted a certain carefully circumscribed activity, often more the *appearance* of activity than activity itself (the maddening, generally vacuous 'brightness' of the '80s heroine), before acknowledging, implicitly or explicitly, that what she really wants and needs is dependence on a man. Hence Karen Allen, early in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, greets Harrison Ford by punching him deservedly in the face, then spends the remainder of the film screaming and being rescued; hence Princess Leia performs a few minor, and generally ineffectual, feats of heroism, but becomes progressively subordinated to the men as the films proceed. A model instance (though the film was not a great commercial success—perhaps it appeared a couple of years too soon, before the full flood of Reaganite reaction) is Debra Winger's role in *Urban Cowboy*. In the first half of the film she proves that she can ride the mechanical bull as well as John Travolta (Hollywood's dominant notion of feminism being that what women want is to perform 'masculine' acts, make war, not love—a version that leaves 'masculinity' secure and undisturbed); she is then systematically beaten down to the realization that what she always 'really' wanted was to wash his socks.

Debra Winger—or more precisely the star image constructed out of her roles, interviews, press releases, etc.—has become the key figure in the '80s Hollywood project of restoring women to their 'correct' place within the patriarchal order. It is possible to pinpoint



**E.T.: The Other as cuddly rubber doll.**

two scenes—among the ugliest in contemporary cinema, and the competition is strong—in two extremely bad and extremely popular films. 1) The scene in *An Officer and a Gentleman* in which Winger turns on her former friend (whose revolt against total and powerless subjection to the male order has taken the form of a pretended pregnancy) with 'God help you' (immediately after Richard Gere has denounced her as a 'cunt'). 2) The scene in *Terms of Endearment* where Winger turns on her pseudo-liberated New York acquaintances and denounces them for their divorces and abortions, all in the name of marriage and the family. The scenes have two important features in common (besides the presence of Winger): both occur at roughly the same point in their respective films, about three-quarters of the way through, when the issues are about to be resolved, the main characters' decisions made; both use a woman to

denounce women who have resisted patriarchy. In both cases the obvious ideological project is 'covered,' the denunciation supported by dramatic justification, in the way in which 'realist' cinema has always disguised its ideological messages: the woman in *An Officer and a Gentleman* has caused a man's suicide, the women in *Terms of Endearment* are presented as empty, insensitive, superficial. The point is that these are the *only* alternatives the films offer their female characters, and they are presented for the sole purpose of validating the heroine's acceptance of her own subordination as the wise, right choice. The co-option of a female character to put down notions of women's independence and safeguard the patriarchal order makes these scenes particularly distasteful and insidious. 4. *Nuclear Anxiety*. Patriarchy appears at present to have two main projects to shore up its morally indefensible presumption, and they

are logically connected in ways that may not be immediately obvious: the subordination of the sex that has recently challenged its hegemony, and the justification for the weaponry that embodies its power and with which it may at any moment choose to end the human race. Nuclear arms must be seen as the ultimate extension of the social construction of masculinity under capitalism, carrying to their culmination its twin principles of competition and domination (the story under Russian Communism is not of course significantly different). It is therefore inevitable that many contemporary Hollywood films should be committed to the enforcement of America's right to build its nuclear arsenal and to the reassurance necessary to lull the fears consequent upon this; if the operation can be disguised as fantasy, so that the realities of nuclear war need never be alluded to, so much the better. Andrew Britton has discussed this at length in an article for *Movie 31/32* that no one interested in contemporary American cinema should miss. Here I shall merely indicate some of the obvious stand-ins for nuclear energy in recent science fiction/fantasy movies: the 'Force' (and the Death Star, product of its 'dark side') in the *Star Wars* saga; the Genesis project of *Star Trek II*; the Ark of the Covenant in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; the mysterious powers in *Ghost Busters*. The films' messages, while not always identical, are very similar: either 'America can handle it' ('Trust him,' as the advertising campaign for *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* succinctly exhorted), or 'Nuclear power is OK provided America controls it.' *Raiders* is particularly eloquent and typically cynical and irresponsible: when the terrible forces are released to annihilate all the evil (i.e. foreign) characters, the Americans survive by the simple expedient of averting their gaze: 'Don't look' might stand as motto for all these films, and the social/political mentality they so popularly embody.

5. *The Construction of the Spectator as Child*. If the master-tendency of the '80s Hollywood cinema is the restoration of the Father, a logical corollary is that the ideal spectator is one who is willing to become a child. The ultimate symbolic Father is of course patriarchal capitalism itself: this is the 'father' that we, as its 'children,' are being coerced into accepting, warts and all, our critical faculties dulled into abeyance, our own Oedipal trajectory leading us towards the necessary identification. Thus Hollywood enacts, overall, the drama that its recent films have so often enacted through their characters and plots. The most overwhelmingly popular films of the '80s—the Lucas/Spielberg works—are essentially children's films: their antecedents were the Batman, Superman, Flash Gordon serials shown in episodes at children's matinees, that no one (perhaps not even children) took very seriously. It is of the essence of the Lucas/Spielberg movies that they are taken seriously and not-seriously simultaneously: the standard reaction to *E.T.* is 'Wasn't it wonderful? . . . But of course, it's only fantasy.'

The 'child' the films seek to construct is, however, a child of a very particular sort that has in fact little resemblance to actual children (at least, the uncorrupted ones). First, it is always a *male* child. Men (being, apparently, all too ready to accept the films' invitation to infantile regression) generally love *E.T.*, women generally don't. What, after all, is a woman to make of a fantasy the climactic moment of which has a little rubber alien transmitting its powers to the boy, then, as an afterthought, instructing his sister to 'Be good'? Second, the constructed 'child' is one without the energetic, inquiring and often profoundly skeptical mind that real children frequently possess before they are effectively 'socialized' (through their families and our educational system): the ideal spectator for the '80s movies that exemplify the 'dominant tendencies' is totally passive, ready to be taken by the hand and led step by step through the narrative to participate emotionally in its reassuringly reactionary conclusion, the kind of child who has retreated from the pains and tensions of the adult world into inveterate thumb-sucking. The situation is not greatly different with films that nominally invite an

adult spectatorship: the manipulations of *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Terms of Endearment* are so transparent that one really has no choice beyond either passive surrender or total rejection.

6. *Getting Laid/Getting Slayed*. I have so far concentrated on the big-budget Hollywood product aimed at wide audiences and characterized by a degree of cultural respectability; it remains to consider briefly what has happened in the '80s to the low-budget 'Exploitation' movie, that area of film-making that in earlier periods frequently produced some of the more interestingly subversive Hollywood films. At first sight the 'mad slasher' movie might seem an exception to the dominant tendencies: its aim is to induce abject terror rather than provide reassurance. What is striking about the films, however, is precisely their emphasis on total powerlessness (both in the characters and in the audience): there is always a terrible threat that *we can't do anything about*; the monster, credited with powers so great as to verge on the supernatural, isn't even killable anymore. The films fall into two interconnected categories, the 'violence against women' movies and the 'teenie-kill pic'; the cycles both have their origins in *Halloween* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (which in turn have a common source in *Psycho*). Both are 'punishment' movies: the teenagers are punished for having sex, the women are punished for being women (or, more precisely, for being 'liberated' women, though as usual the notion of liberation operating here is pretty simplistic). The teenie-kill movies are also connected to the high school/college cycle: both represent teenagers as singlemindedly concerned with the pursuit of sex, in environments where adults either are not present (the summer camp films) or function merely as obstacles to be circumvented. If promiscuity is punished (less obviously in the high school films, though *Porky's* is quite obsessive on the subject of castration), it is also continually indulged and endorsed. The films have their significance in relation to consumer capitalism's systematic commodification of sex. The satisfaction offered the youth audience is presumably two-fold: the spectators, themselves products of a 'permissive' society that still morally disapproves of what it permits, can identify both with the promiscuity and the punishment. The most sinister aspect of the films, however, is the attribution to young people of total mindlessness: after the politicization of the '60s and '70s with its resulting campus riots, protest, consciousness-raising, the youth audience of today is encouraged to identify with characters to whom nothing is important except sex and dope. The alternative to constructing the spectator as a child is to construct him (the implied spectatorship being once again male) as a vacuous, unaware and helpless hedonist.

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These, then, are the dominant tendencies of an era that is proving to be the most impoverished, the most cynical, the most reactionary, the *emptiest*, in the entire history of Hollywood. Our aim, in the remainder of this issue, is to rescue from oblivion a number of films (mainly, but not exclusively, American) which have been pushed aside, overlooked, undervalued, and which also happen (not coincidentally) to be in some sense oppositional to these tendencies, or at least to fit very awkwardly into the current mainstream, so as to create a disturbance within it. Our selection is not meant to be exhaustive (the rescue operation will be resumed in later issues). Neither are we claiming to unearth forgotten masterpieces: given the contemporary climate, one might expect that even the more interesting works would prove on close inspection to be flawed, compromised, ambiguous, and this is generally the case. What we *do* claim for these films is that they are *interesting*: more interesting, certainly, than the reassuringly conformist works that merely reflect Reaganite America without commenting on it, or without introducing a grain of salt or dash of vinegar into the Reaganite apple pie.

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# Rap/Punk/Hollywood: Beat Street and Out of the Blue



by Bryan Bruce

**T**HE MUSICAL, LIKE ALL TRADITIONAL HOLLYWOOD genres, has not survived in its classical form; rather, it continues its existence in current filmic texts as one component in a confluence of two or more genres, as homage, as parody, or as a certain tendency of the auteur towards self-reflexivity—three different yet sometimes indistinguishable inflections of the reworking of classical genres.

The intermixing of genres often occurs as an appropriation of narrative forms from classical generic prototypes. Much has been made, for example, of the way in which several modern Hollywood film-makers (Scorsese, Schrader, Cimino) have used, to the point of obsession, the narrative structure of John Ford's *The Searchers*, a relatively late Western in the history of that particular genre, which, in its highly conventionalized and codified form, presents a condensation of the basic components of the Western which can be easily (if uncomfortably) integrated into modern, urban film texts (for example, frontierism and the civilization/wilderness opposition displaced onto the city, as in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*).

Homage and parody are the least interesting instances of the reworking of classical genres, often owing to the obvious and stridently self-conscious manner in which this type of film approaches the generic material. (Examples are numerous—from the films of Mel Brooks to the Western-influenced adventure epics of Spielberg and Lucas). More interesting is the tendency of certain post-classical directors to address classical genres as a self-reflexive comment on their own identity within the Hollywood film industry (Scorsese's *New York, New York*, for example, which presents itself through the conventions of the classical Hollywood Musical, but which remains, unrelentingly, a post-classical, 'Scorsesian' film).

These introductory remarks on genre are offered as an attempt to situate in a modern context two recent and, significantly, overlooked films which draw on generic conventions without being strictly identifiable as films of a specific genre. Both *Beat Street* (director: Stan Lathan, 1984) and *Out of the Blue* (director: Dennis Hopper, 1979; released in Canada as *No Looking Back*) are structured around music (although only the former can be identified as a 'Musical,' and then only problematically) and around subcultures emerging from particular forms of music (rap and punk, respectively), and both films are further related to other genres (the 'road' movie, for example, which presents troubled characters, drifters, on the road, on the streets, evoking the settling/wandering opposition of the Western). It is instructive to keep in mind how Hollywood attempts to classify its products according to its own history and its own structuring principles. Genre, then, is a means of explaining, controlling, and classifying potentially difficult films; the moderate success of *Beat Street* at the box office may be partly accounted for by its marketing and narrative identity as a Musical or 'neo-Musical,' classification which *Out of the Blue* does not have access to. (These issues will be dealt with more fully later.)

The lack of critical and popular success of both films is partly attributable to their identity as films about and, to a degree, for, very specific sub-cultures. *Beat Street* attracted a limited youth audience, and indeed was produced on the strength of the mass cultural appropriation of rap music and break dancing, a phenomenon originating in the ghettos of New York City; *Out of the Blue* has neither been widely distributed nor critically evaluated, partly

because punk music/culture, as an extreme and violent movement, has proven far less appropriable by the media than rap-break culture, the latter having been taken up by the commercial market *ad nauseum*.

The two films demonstrate how the Hollywood machine deals with sub-cultures which are oppositional to the dominant ideology, and, as a corollary, how films which are in some sense oppositional have inflected the specific set of ideological assumptions that the majority of Hollywood films attempt to reconstitute both structurally and thematically. The punk and break/rap sub-cultures, both in their music and in their social organization, are, to varying degrees, critical of patriarchal, capitalist culture and social institutions; the two films, in addressing these sub-cultures, are subject to the influence of mainstream (i.e. Hollywood) cinematic conventions, both through the exigencies of production, distribution, and exhibition, and through the conventions of narrativity and genre. Hollywood, then, as an industry concerned with capitalist gain and as a reflection of the dominant ideology, attempts to transpose its operations onto subversive cultural organizations, resulting in ideological contradiction within the films. It is remarkable that *Beat Street* and *Out of the Blue* have resisted complete appropriation by Hollywood in spite of the decidedly reactionary character of the majority of mainstream films in the past five years, and manage to disrupt some of Hollywood's most dangerous current tendencies.

Before considering the two films individually, I offer several points of intersection as an indication of the issues raised by the films:

1) As I have already mentioned, both films present sub-cultures which are in some sense disruptive of the dominant ideology, and in both instances the conventions of mainstream cinema dictated by that ideology attempt to counter-act or dilute the disruption.

2) Intentionality aside, both films present this disruption in a sexual (Freudian) context—the struggle of the main characters can be read as the tension between the desire for immediate gratification and its unnecessarily extreme postponement (surplus repression).

3) The two films are youth oriented, depicting the world from the point of view of the child, and offer children who are resistant to the process of socialization and institutionalization and to authority complexes.

4) Both films deal with absent fathers.

5) Both films attempt to produce the couple, but fail.

6) The films address working class families and the tension between classes.

7) Both films address the issue of death unconventionally.

8) The subcultures depicted in the films are centred on music—punk in *Out of the Blue*, a loud, discordant, aggressive, unconventional form, and rap in *Beat Street*, a more structured, more palatable musical form, but unconventional in its use of speech and colloquial language. Both forms of music are explicit in their critique of culture and social institutions.

9) There is a tendency towards traditional narrative structure in the films (both are mainstream, narrative films, conforming to such Hollywood conventions as invisible editing, character identification, narrative symmetry, etc.), and a resistance to these conventions.

10) As mentioned in my introductory remarks, the two films refer to traditional Hollywood genres but are not easily situated within a specific genre (*Beat Street* is roughly a Musical while *Out of the Blue*, although a 'punk' movie, owes less to the Musical than to the Western, if only as an influence—the red-neck bars, the mother's western costume as a waitress, etc.); both are related to the road movie, presenting characters on the street, dislocated, resisting the structures of home and family which, in both instances, are already disrupted at the outset of the narrative.

*Beat Street* is an example of the Hollywood tradition of appro-

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**OPPOSITE—*Beat Street*: Ramon (John Chardlet, second from right): the struggle for survival and the expression of creativity.**

priating popular musical trends in order to appeal to the youth audience (the rock'n'roll movies of the '50s, the disco movies of the '70s). The 'neo-Musical' which directly precedes *Beat Street*—*Fame*, *Flashdance*, *Staying Alive*, etc.—is predicated on a frighteningly coherent set of ideological assumptions. In each of these films music and dance, and, by implication, art in general, become an avenue of escape from the lower and lower middle classes, and a means to wealth and power through the ascension to 'legitimate' art. *Flashdance* offers the clearest opposition between 'working class' and 'legitimate' art. The Jennifer Beals character—welder by day, erotic dancer by night—takes as her goal admission into ballet school. She visits the school to witness the elegant, timeless surroundings, the girls dressed in feminine, gossamer ballet costumes—the signifiers of a rigidly organized, idealized femininity (the structure—the eternally feminine, outside of time or historical determination—of no structure). The film showcases the independently choreographed dance pieces of the erotic "flashdancers," obviously presented in the working class bar as objects for the male gaze, but fails to consider classical ballet as an equally objectifying spectacle which polarizes images of masculinity and femininity into idealized categories strictly attributable to male and female respectively. At the end of the film, when the Beals character gains entrance to the ballet school and is formulated as a couple with her employer/boyfriend, the strict organization of sexual difference under patriarchy is overwhelmingly reinforced.

*Beat Street* sets up the same opposition between working class and legitimate art and the class tension which it produces. Tracy/Rae Dawn Chong is the wealthy uptown girl who attends art school but who is also connected to the street art scene—graffiti, rap, breakdancing, etc. Historically, the geography of Manhattan has signified different levels of art. Uptown has long been associated with classical, legitimate art—ballet, opera, Broadway theatre—while downtown (the Village) has been the site of alternative art forms—avant-garde performance art, Off Off Broadway, etc. Recently, however, the gentrification of the Village has tended to blur this almost mythic distinction, and 'legitimate' and alternative art are not so distinctly situated. Graffiti and rap/break art has originated from way uptown—Harlem and the South Bronx—but is a significantly mobile, transient art form (graffiti art on subway trains literally travels all over New York City) in opposition to the stable, established sites of conventional art forms. Street art is represented by two black brothers—Lee and Kenny Kirkland/Robert Taylor and Guy Davis, a break-dancer and rap d.j., respectively—and by their Puerto Rican friend Ramon/John Chardiet, a graffiti artist. The only family established at the outset of the narrative has already been disrupted—Lee and Kenny live alone with their mother, the father absent, the older brother, Franklin, killed by the police for some drug-related crime. Ramone's father is also shown (always pressuring him to get a 'real job'), but never in the context of home. These characters seem to live as much on the street as in their homes, and constitute, along with their friends, a kind of extended family. At the beginning of the film the main characters find a boy playing percussion on the pipes in the basement of their local dance club, The Burning Spear, and, despite his lack of money, he is invited into the group and provided with food. The name of the club, the basic drive for survival (food and shelter), and the break-dance competitions between groups combine to signify tribal life as an alternative to the broken homes and families depicted in the film which signify the breakdown of the nuclear family.

The film posits two levels of authority which attempt to channel the considerable (sexual) energy of the young people who, through primal, ritualistic connotations, can be read as representatives of the id: the parental figures, already constituted (and exploited) as subjects within the patriarchal, capitalist order (symbolically ego

figures, more 'successfully' formulated than their children) and the police and school systems (super ego), institutions whose function it is to formulate whole, unproblematic subjects. There is not only a tension produced between authority/children, but also between the two authority complexes. When Lee is arrested by the police for participating in a break competition in the subway (staged in the film as a mock gang war), his mother scolds both Lee, for breaking the rules, and the cop, for arresting kids for dancing, a healthy channelling of their subversive energy. The police do not understand the distinction between violent and constructive expression, or are not concerned with it, and act only upon the form.

Within this system of authority (the regulating body of culture), two highly signified worlds are set up: the institutionalized, ordered, moneyed, uptown existence encompassing legitimate art, and the street life—poverty, chaos, visible crime—the failure of culture to impart its structure onto those who are exploited and alienated by it—out of which street art emerges. Tracy and Kenny, representatives of the two worlds, are tentatively formulated as a mediation of the opposed organizations—both are attracted to the opposite life, but are afraid to enter it. When Kenny leads the reluctant Tracy down into the subway to meet Lee and Ramone, who is practising his graffiti art, the opposition is clear—the 'legitimate' art (music and dance) that Tracy produces at the school is safe, stable, regulated by conventions, assimilable by social structure; street art is dangerous, literally against the law, wandering, chaotic, a threat to the normative conventions of culture and art. Tracy's descent into this art underworld is the beginning of her questioning of legitimate, institutionalized art.

Legitimate art has, of course, attempted to appropriate street art, both as an influence in established art conventions and through patronage; for example, graffiti artists have been sponsored by art galleries (attempting to contain an uncontrollable force—the meaning of this art is defined equally by its content (the thing spray-painted) and its form (moveable, temporary, glimpsed as opposed to studied or analyzed)—out of this context it is meaningless), and break-dance moves have been taken up by various dance factions. Kenny explicitly identifies the character of this appropriation when he says to Tracy: "I got it figured out—you're the missionary and I'm the native." The revelation is startling—white culture (ironically represented by a black girl—the signifiers of color have shifted, an example of ideological co-option) is still attempting to convert and assimilate alternative cultural organizations in the Christian imperialist tradition.

Arguably, the film itself, through conventions of narrativity and genre, activates this same tendency to neutralize and dilute alternative sub-cultures. The Hollywood Musical is built around a set of conventions and presuppositions that discourage critical or analytical investigation; more than any other genre, the Musical is meant to be 'fun,' pure entertainment, escapism, requiring a greater degree of suspension of disbelief (people never break into song in real life like they do in Musicals). The more recent Musical convention of using music which is strictly accountable for within the situations created by the narrative (*Cabaret*, *New York, New York*,) has shifted the genre into a more 'realistic' context (although in certain instances, as in *New York, New York*, maintaining an intended artificiality), tending to limit the genre to stories containing musicians and singers whose performances constitute the musical numbers of the film (as opposed to *Brigadoon* or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* in which virtually everyone sings and dances). *Beat Street*, then, follows in the more recent 'realist' Musical tradition, depicting the lives of musicians and dancers in their own milieu, and thus predisposing the film to a more consciously critical operation, potentially addressing specific social/political material. In practice, however, it is questionable whether or not this has occurred—the film has been marketed as a rap/break-dance movie for kids, not as a film about



**Out of the Blue:** Donny (Dennis Hopper), Cathy (Sharon Farrell) and Cebe (Linda Manz): the absent father.

the social/political issues raised by the rap phenomenon. Further, the more 'realistic' Musical, i.e. one which accounts for its musical numbers strictly in a narrative context, taking Fosse's *Cabaret* as an example, should not be regarded as more politically significant or worthier of serious critical attention merely because it more closely approximates 'reality'; the ideological contradictions raised by a film like Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis*, a highly unrealistic, stylized, and seemingly unpolitical classical Musical, are arguably of greater interest and even more coherently presented (even if on an unconscious level) than the political content of a Musical like *Cabaret* which presents itself as important and significant.

*Beat Street* is perhaps a more marketable and more accessible film than *Out of the Blue* because of its association with the Musical genre; however, the expectations created by this identification are to some extent undermined. Within its generic operations, the film presents itself through Hollywood narrative conventions, using traditional oppositions on which the story is structured (generally, birth/death, success/failure), setting up enigmas to be followed (Who is Spit? Will Ramone catch up with and paint the significantly white and unattainable subway train?), and leading up to the resolution of conflicts in the musical finale (another neo-Musical

convention—*Fame*, *Staying Alive*, and *Flashdance* also end with the big musical/dance number which proves the success or failure of the main characters). But within these conventions *Beat Street* remains oppositional through its particular inflection of them; the specific class and cultural issues the film offers and the way they are resolved allow the film to undercut its generic and narrative restrictions.

The treatment of the death of Ramone is presented as the axis of the major conflicts—between street art and legitimate art, art and authority, ego and superego—and the resistance to conformity. He is caught between the need to express himself as an artist and the pressure to conform to the culture which his art is attempting to subvert. His father condemns him for not having a 'real' job, for not being able to support his girlfriend and child, for not being a man. Ramone replies, "How come a man is what you say? I am a graffiti artist—I make those cars beautiful"; nevertheless he gets a job in a store and moves his girlfriend and baby into their own apartment (collecting junk from the street to furnish it), a compromise between his art/street life and adult respectability. He complains that the night shift of his new job interferes with his 'real work,' his art. He is concerned more with expressing his energy in the present, as opposed to the possibly permanent postponement of gratification

demanding by a surplus repressive culture. Ramone says to Kenny, "When you're mixing sounds and I'm painting cars, we're alive." The struggle for survival and the expression of creativity (and, for Ramone, the danger of expressing his particular art) create an immediacy in opposition to the organization of time and the control of history exerted by patriarchal culture.

The death of Ramone, electrocuted on the by now mythic third rail of the subway tracks while fighting with "Spit," the unidentified graffitiist who disfigures his work, is inter-cut with the legitimate dance/music performance that Tracy has orchestrated. The dance she has created, balletic black dancers in native costumes, represents an appropriation of black culture as opposed to break/rap which is the new, indigenous art form. That Ramone dies for his art (we are shown afterwards a sample of his work which states, "if art is a crime, may God forgive me") while Tracy's show goes smoothly and is accepted enthusiastically by the crowd underlines the distinction between the two forms. Ramone's death allows Tracy to realize the relative unimportance of her work (accomplished, but safe and assimilable) and prepares us for the finale of the film—the celebration of Ramone's death.

The treatment of death in Hollywood cinema has always been problematic, situated somewhere between taboo or denial and its reduction to narrative exigency. In *Beat Street*, the death of Ramone, while providing the resolution of the narrative and motivation for the dance/musical spectacle that concludes the neo-Musical, becomes a cause for celebration—respect for the immediacy of expression of his art and his conviction in carrying it out. As an alternative to the tendency of certain post-classical films to present death apocalyptically as a negation or eradication of order (*Scarface*), and in opposition to classical reductionism, *Beat Street* manages to produce a (qualified) happy ending predicated on death. Ramone's death, as interpreted by Kenny in his debut as d.j. at the Roxv, represents a positive radical stance, a fundamental questioning of cultural assumptions about life and death—construction over deconstruction.



**Out of the Blue: Cebe and Donny: the distracting kiss.**

*Beat Street* fails to produce the couple and the nuclear family, but equally fails to account for an alternative position for women outside these conventional forms. The rap/break world is itself predominantly male-centred, and although the film goes out of its way to present female performers (Us Girls, Tina B.) and even a female breakdancer, rap/break, as an oppositional sub-culture, does not address the problem of restrictive sexual organization and culturally formulated sexual difference (and exploitation) in the way that punk culture does. Cebe/Linda Manz, the central character

of Dennis Hopper's *Out of the Blue*, embodies the resistance towards sexual difference that partly defines punk culture; and her refusal to conform to normal sexual behavior informs the course of the entire film.

*Out of the Blue* comes 10 years after Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), the Hollywood film that most popularly expresses the disillusioned and revolutionary ethos of the '60s. As the central characters in a male buddy/road movie, Hopper and Peter Fonda represent a threat to the fundamental tenets of bourgeois culture, rejecting any notion of home, family, heterosexual monogamy, etc.; and the American capitalist ideal of free enterprise is upheld, here as in *Bonnie and Clyde*, only through crime (the drug deal). In an ironic inversion, *Out of the Blue* puts Hopper in the opposite position (representing, in some respects, that which annihilated him at the end of *Easy Rider*), and revolt in the hands of a young, pubescent, androgynous, punk-inspired girl.

The narrative is structured primarily around the consciousness of Cebe, beginning with her nightmare of the accident which disrupted her family and sent her father, Donny Barnes/Hopper, to prison, and following her misadventures on the streets, in clubs and bowling alleys, etc. In the opening dream/flashback sequence, Donny and Cebe are riding in the cab of Donny's transport truck, Cebe dressed in a clown outfit (it is Hallowe'en) and singing a rock'n'roll song ("put a chain around my neck and meet me anywhere"). (Cebe is presented throughout the film in terms of masquerade, here, like Tootie, the apocalyptic child in the Hallowe'en sequence of Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis*, precipitating disaster). It is the distracting kiss between Donny and Cebe, and, by implication, the incest potential of the nuclear family, that causes the accident; Donny's truck (trucks and truckers in American road movies representing the ideal of free enterprise, frontierism, the settling/wandering opposition, etc.) smashes into a school bus full of Hallowe'en costumed children. In the next sequence Cebe is in the same truck, sitting idle for years beside their house, and she is speaking punk aphorisms ("subvert normality," "anarchy," "disco sucks") into the CB radio (the origin of her name).

*Out of the Blue* exhibits the same narrative preoccupations as *Beat Street*—the attempted production of the nuclear family and reconstitution of the absent father, and the resistance towards authority structures and institutions—but in a more explicitly sexual context. Cebe's androgyny, although a masquerade rejecting the cultural organization of sexual difference, is also a repression of sexuality which, as in so many horror films of the '70s, leads, inevitably, to apocalypse. Cebe says, "Punk is not sexual; it's just aggression," failing to recognize punk aggression as an alternative channelling of sexual energy. The repression resulting from Cebe's nuclear family, however, is already complete and manifests irreversible contradictions which lead, by the end of the film, to its annihilation.

Despite her claims of asexuality, Cebe's symbolic father/hero figure, Elvis, is a sexual icon, one which she associates with her real father and other symbolic fathers (Sid Vicious, Johnny Rotten)—one of the contradictions she cannot reconcile. Early in the film she rejects the formulation of the father figure into the couple when she burns a picture of Elvis and a woman captioned "the only woman Elvis ever loved," beside a picture of her real mother and father; Cebe is confused by the sexual attraction between her and her father figures, the tension of family romances.

Cebe's mother, Cathy/Sharon Farrell, represents a further contradiction for Cebe. Cathy lives on the hope of reconciling the family and conforming to family ideals, but simultaneously sabotages those ideals through the promiscuous satisfaction of her strong sexual drive and her heroin habit. Cathy is further confused by the tension between the two male ideals which she identifies as the "wild and sexy" man (Donny, her husband) and the provider (Paul, the man for whom Cathy works at the restaurant and with whom

she is having an affair). The opposition, again, is between sexual gratification and its postponement in the service of culture; the film presents a male-ordered culture which does not allow for an acceptable compromise between the two extremes.

Cebe runs away from home when she sees her mother shooting up and having sex with Charlie, her husband's best friend, and we are shown her adventures on the street. At one point, she runs up a set of steps and raises her arms triumphantly as a parody of *Rocky*, an example of the tendency of films in the late '70s to reassert the American success story and unproblematic hero identification after their almost complete deconstruction in the late '60s and early '70s. The narrative structure of *Out of the Blue* goes against this tendency: Hopper incorporates real street people in the film (Manz herself was discovered on the streets, as were many of the performers in *Beat Street*) and makes much use of the hand-held camera, approximating a neo-realist style, resisting the resurgence of Hollywood slickness and artifice; and Cebe, the main character of identification, is one of the most startling anti-heroes contemporary cinema has produced.

Cebe is taken to a whorehouse by a cab driver, and there is confronted for the first time with adult sexuality, both male and female, explicitly directed towards her outside the family context. Her reaction is violent, anticipating the apocalyptic ending of the film. The sequence is disturbing in its stark presentation of the close proximity between child and adult sexuality: Cebe, curled up on a pillow and sucking her thumb, is framed by the stockinged leg of the popsicle-sucking prostitute—oral satisfaction by signifiers of childhood in an adult, sexual milieu.

The punk club sequence which follows is equally disturbing in its presentation of sexuality and violence which become, in punk culture, indistinguishable: the fetishization of chains and weapons, the leash signifying dominance and submissiveness in sexual relationships—punk gestures which are critical of normality by acting as extreme, exaggerated representations of its operations, more honest, perhaps, in their literalness.

The sequence also presents the opportunity for directorial self-reflexivity by introducing a man with a movie camera who is documenting the punk scene. The questions he asks the punk musicians are critical and contradictory: "What does punk mean to you? Why do you do it—fame, money? Say something legible." The latter expresses the paradox of punk—it is an anti-statement, attempting to operate gesturally, outside logocentric culture. Words are manipulated by the dominant, male-centred culture to organize, explain, maintain order; punk attempts to subvert this order through gesture, but, unfortunately, only aspire to chaos and anarchy.

The title of the film defines the opposition to the patriarchal strategy of control, order, organization, and difference. The accident at the beginning of the film comes out of the blue, without warning, the imposition of chaos, the disorder that activates the narrative (although the accident, as I mentioned earlier, is precipitated by a culturally specific set of circumstances—the (sexual) relationship between father and daughter, the distracting kiss). It is the nature of patriarchy to order the past, history, and to exert control over death; this ordering is disrupted at the outset of the film, and the subsequent attempt to restore it, to reclaim the past, is denied (the film has also been released under the title *No Looking Back*).

Cebe's experiences at school demonstrate the way in which social structures attempt to maintain order over chaos. In one sequence she fails to organize her things in time to catch the bus and when she arrives late at school, she tries to sneak into her math class, mathematics representing the strictly organizable and accountable. She is found out and sent to the principal's office, shuffled from one male authority figure to another. After school she attends the football

game where boys and girls are strictly uniformed and organized by gender (football players and cheerleaders) and where even the music is regimented and ordered. Cebe walks, smoking a cigarette, in the opposite direction, through the marching band, and finally trips the blond cheerleader (the girl whose father, Anderson, has Donny fired and harrases him for having killed his son in the school bus accident). She is then sent off to a psychiatrist, yet another male authority figure, and returned to her home, the origin of the order that she is constantly resisting.

The final sequences in the Barnes home are extremely difficult to watch, evoking the treatment of the nuclear family in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. Scenes of Cebe making herself up and dressing in her father's old motorcycle leathers (again, escaping through masquerade) are intercut with the actions of the three adults—Cathy, Donny, and Charlie, his best friend. Donny gets drunk in the kitchen; Cathy shoots up in the bathroom and begins to make love to Charlie in the living room.

Donny has given up on his dream of getting his rig on the road again, his attempt to bring back the past. He and Charlie have murdered Anderson, the outraged parent, who emerged out of the blue, unexpected, threatening—killing him as the only means of controlling him and the past. Donny has already lost his job bulldozing garbage, and is now afraid of being sent back to jail—the most extreme imposition of institutional order and authority.

At this point, the contradictions the film has presented come to the surface—sexual identity and the incest taboo are shattered. Cathy is paranoid about becoming a "dyke" and the parents are afraid that their daughter has also become one; Charlie and Donny go to Cebe's room to have sex with her. Cebe tries to fight them off with a chair and tells everyone that she hates men, although she has become one herself (she has painted on sideburns and greased back her hair in order to become Elvis, her symbolic father—earlier she said she wanted to die, so she could visit him). Cebe has identified herself with the father but at the same time recognizes him as the enemy, and can no longer sustain the contradiction. Donny is still attempting to impose cultural order by insisting she dress like a lady; the form is to be maintained no matter how much it has been undermined.

Cebe finally shoves her panties into her father's mouth and encourages him to look at her vagina and to "take a good smell"—the ultimate recognition of sexual difference behind her masquerade that is so important to him, and stabs him to death with a pair of scissors (again, like a scene out of *Night of the Living Dead*); the repression of sexuality dictated by the nuclear family explodes in violence (at one point Cebe identifies her father as a "mother-fucker," as do the sons in *Christine* and *Purple Rain*, making the Oedipal tensions explicit). It is a shocking inversion of sexual conventions: the daughter shoves the fetishized object in the father's mouth and stabs him (a phallic, aggressive act) while dressed up as a man, and, in fact, as a reflection of the father. Again, such contradictions and tensions cannot be sustained within the normal structuring principles of mainstream film.

In the last sequence, Cebe takes her mother to the rig ("we're going where it all started"), having now pierced her face with a giant safety pin. In the truck Cebe lights the fuse of the dynamite Donny had been selling illegally. When Cathy asks her what it is, she replies, "There's nothing behind it—it's a punk gesture." Everything for Cebe has become gesture, form, masquerade—she can no longer define herself, caught between authority/order/the family and chaos/punk. Her final words to her mother bring the film back to the punk ethos: "Do you know why Dad knows more about punk than you do? Sid Vicious—when he left, he took his loved ones with him." The truck explodes, the narrative having come full circle—an apocalyptic ending to one of the bleakest and most critical films of the '70s. □

# A Matter of Time



by Richard Lippe

VINCENTE MINNELLI'S *A MATTER OF TIME* WAS given a theatrical release in 1976 but, as the film was an immediate critical and commercial failure, it was withdrawn from distribution after its premiere engagements. In actuality, the critics and public were reacting to a mutilated version of the film which, at present, still hasn't been seen in its original form. *A Matter of Time* was conceived as an Italian-American co-production with American International Pictures (AIP) participating financially in the project and receiving, in return, the North American release rights. Supposedly, AIP's initial commitment to the project was based on the notion that the company needed to alter its image offering products other than the exploitation film. Unfortunately, after the film was shot, AIP held Minnelli to their agreement which allowed him the first cut of the film but gave AIP the option to reject the cut if it didn't satisfy them. AIP took the footage and, through a process of editing and re-cutting, shaped a film to meet their conception which, no doubt, was dictated by their past products and marketing procedures. For Minnelli, AIP's conception was an affront to his creative and artistic competence as a filmmaker and Minnelli, in response, disowned their version, claiming that, in addition to the omission of scenes, stock footage had been added and a sequence devised as an epilogue was now serving as a prologue. In the AIP version, the stock footage, which is used in a montage of scenic shots of Rome, is very distracting and it is easy to see how material meant for an epilogue has been split into footage for both a prologue and epilogue. In addition, the release prints have careless sound synchronization, making everybody, including Liza Minnelli, look dubbed.

For the mid-'70s *A Matter of Time* had a fairly large budget, \$5,000,000 and, clearly, Minnelli conceived the film in the grand tradition of the Hollywood studio-made film for which he is famous. This was Minnelli's first attempt to make a film completely outside the studio system and, to ensure the best possible results, he enlisted several of his past collaborators to participate in the project. Edmund Grainger, producer of *Home From the Hill*, agreed to co-produce and John Gay, scriptwriter on *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, did the script. In casting, the project renewed Minnelli's working relationship with Charles Boyer (*The Cobweb*, *Four Horsemen*) who, previously, had done two films with Ingrid Bergman (*Gaslight*, *Arch of Triumph*), and Bergman's daughter, Isabella Rossellini, in a brief appearance, makes her screen debut. But, of particular importance to Vincente and Liza Minnelli, the project was the realization of their long-term desire to collaborate on a professional basis. As I will discuss, the result, in regard to certain thematic connotations the collaboration produces, is a culmination film. Since Minnelli is in his mid-'70s, and has suffered from ill health the last few years, in all likelihood *A Matter of Time* is his final film and, despite AIP's interference, it survives as one of Minnelli's richest and most personal achievements. Recently, the American Film Institute (AFI) was successful in gaining Warner Brothers' permission to restore the excised footage from George Cukor's *A Star is Born*. As the AFI has announced its intention to restore other films to their directors' original conceptions, it can be hoped that *A Matter of Time* will be included in the Institute's plans. I can think of no finer tribute the AFI could offer Minnelli, whose full critical recognition in North America is long overdue.

The film, based on the Maurice Druon novel, *The Film of Memory*, is a period melodrama with music that concerns the awakening of a young woman, Nina/Liza Minnelli, to her potential as a person and the possibilities life has to offer. The film as we have it

uses a flashback structure to introduce the story proper. *A Matter of Time*, set in Rome, 1949, opens with a press conference which is being held to launch the latest film starring Nina, an internationally famous screen star. While the press awaits her arrival, a series of film clips from Nina's previous films is screened. The film then cuts to Nina who, with an admirer, is being driven to the conference. A remark the man makes prompts her memory and her flashback tells us the story of how she got to be a famous screen star.

To begin, *A Matter of Time* has direct affinities with Minnelli's previous production, *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970), starring Barbra Streisand and Yves Montand. In both films, the heroine, because of a restricting social environment and self-consciousness about her inadequacies, cannot envision her potential as a creative person. (Initially, Daisy Gamble/Barbra Streisand doesn't realize that her ability to make flowers grow and blossom overnight is a direct expression of her creative forces and, in fact, tries to keep the fact a secret. In contrast, in the film's concluding sequence, Daisy, in effect, is making a public declaration of it as she sings "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever" in a flower garden.) In particular, this creativity involves performance and, in each film, is unlocked through contact with another person, respectively, the Contessa/Ingrid Bergman, Dr. Marc Chabot/Yves Montand, who is able to help the heroine transcend the impediments of her present circumstances and self-image. In *A Matter of Time*, Nina is projected into the past to relive it as another identity, the Contessa's, so that she can express aspects of herself which are unrealized. The framing structure of the film (which Minnelli conceived as an epilogue) allows us to see that Nina, in becoming an actress, has found the means to achieve her full potential in her present life. In the conclusion of *On a Clear Day*, which, ostensibly, deals with ESP and reincarnation, Daisy, who, under hypnosis, has enacted one of her previous and more extraordinary identities, knows she will again be such a person in the next century.

In being centred on their heroines' recognition and acceptance of their creativity, these films are uncharacteristic products of the Hollywood cinema, which, despite the impact feminism has produced on contemporary awareness of the patriarchal structuring of gender concepts, tends to produce scenarios celebrating male achievement. Furthermore, in regard to their central love relationship, the films are unconventional projects. While *On a Clear Day*, in keeping with the dictates of the Hollywood cinema, moves towards the formation of the heterosexual couple in its resolution, the film can be read as a renegotiation of the basis on which a male/female love relationship exists. It is crucial to the film's conception that both Daisy and Chabot experience a transformation in orientation toward her identity. Initially, Chabot sees Daisy and Melinda, the woman she was in the 19th Century, as separate identities and makes a point of his preference for the earlier persona. But, as the film implies, the division doesn't exist and it is Chabot's lack of perception and, by extension, creativity that needs to be awakened if he is to be a suitable partner. Chabot must relinquish his position of male dominance toward Daisy which is based, in part, on an investment in medical and scientific knowledge and which, he thinks, makes him her superior. In addition, although the film implies that Daisy and Chabot will 'couple' in a future existence, the film's actual 'happy ending' is predicated on Daisy's discoveries of her remarkableness as a person.

*On a Clear Day*, in suggesting a love relationship between Daisy and Chabot isn't possible until both partners see themselves and each other as equals, has muted feminist implications. These implications are extended and developed in *A Matter of Time*—a film, which, on one hand, evokes the romantic fairytale but, on the other, in refusing to provide its heroine with a male counterpart, produces a radical break with a formula which has been the basis of many Hollywood film narratives. Conceivably, the film could have paired Nina and Mario/Spiros Andros, the young writer; but, instead, in several of the scenes between the two, he is discredited through his

**OPPOSITE—*A Matter of Time*: Father and daughter discuss the shooting of a scene.**

abusive and egoistical behaviour. The film's rejection of a 'hero' is reinforced through the depiction of the confrontation between the Contessa and her long-estranged husband. The Count/Charles Boyer, in visiting the Contessa, seems to be acting on self-interest expecting to find her humbled by old age and financial impoverishment and grateful for his reappearance. While the details of their relationship aren't explored, it seems likely, given the Contessa's comments to the Count about his past attitudes and behavior, that the marriage wasn't based on a love relation. Instead, the marriage appears to have been more of an 'arrangement' in which the Count was to take 'possession' of the Contessa and, in return, provide for her financial well-being. In addition, there is an indirect reference to women resorting to prostitution to survive in the film's presentation of Nina's cousin. Although Valentina/Tina Aumont isn't defined as a prostitute, her 'night-off' outfits and make-up signify the profession. (Significantly, Nina, in becoming an actress, controls money in her own right and, also, her physical and emotional identity.) When the Count discovers that the Contessa lives in memories and, in particular, an imagined future which involves a reunion with a former lover, he leaves, telling her, "Age has taught you nothing." While the remark has a validity, it also implies that the Count has never considered the Contessa as much more than capricious and self-indulgent.

*A Matter of Time* abandons the hero concept and with it the need to give a primary status to the male/female relationship. The above-mentioned relations have relevance to the film's overall conception in making a direct statement on gender inequality but, more importantly, in serving as counterpoint to the increasingly expansive relations Nina has with the Contessa. Nina, through an identification with the Contessa, becomes aware of her physical beauty, imagination and creative capacities; but, paradoxically, as her emotional involvement with the Contessa grows, Nina realizes the need to distance herself from the kind of identity in which the Contessa has been trapped. The Contessa's life has been dedicated to male achievements and she is left in old age with nothing but memories and fantasies of past love affairs.

There is the subtle suggestion in Bergman's uncompromising performance that the Contessa's embitterment stems from a conscious regret of the dedication. It is, undoubtedly, a realization that serves to intensify the Contessa's retreat into the past or a fantasy in which a male verifies her identity through his actions. As Nina comes to understand, the Contessa is a vulnerable and frightened woman needing affection, but her vitalness remains commanding a respect and admiration. The Contessa, before dying, asks her attendant, Sister Pia/Isabella Rossellini, "Is life over already?" The words have a particular poignancy as the Contessa has so much still to achieve—an existence in which she would fulfill her needs and desires.

Of course, in the film's conception, it is the Contessa's dying and death which allows Nina to begin living out her identity in the present. As Nina is on her way to the screen test, the Contessa leaves the hotel in search of the former lover, having no longer any awareness of her contemporary environment and situation. When she flees a hotel where she has been searching for the lover, the Contessa is hit by a car. At the same moment, Nina, who is doing badly with the screen test, is induced to talk about the Contessa. As she verbalizes her love for the Contessa, she forgets about the 'reality' of the rest and becomes emotionally and physically expressive. Minnelli's inter-cutting of these scenes has a powerful emotional effect—in particular, in regard to Nina's monologue honoring the Contessa. Previously, in various scenes, Nina's attempts to help and defend the Contessa have been ignored by those around her. In the film's following sequence, Nina arrives at the hospital to find that the Contessa has died. Nina's reaction is a calm acceptance of the fact. The response evokes the Contessa's belief that people

only 'die' when you abandon them. And, for Nina, that abandonment would be the rejection of her own identity—an identity which mirrors the Contessa's in its potentialities but also exists independent of it.

*A Matter of Time*, like a number of Minnelli's films, can be read as a 'fantasy' film; and, often, critics have leveled the accusation of fancifulness to dismiss his work from serious consideration. Yet, there is nothing naive, sentimental or simplistic about the film's presentation and treatment of the Nina/Contessa relationship. And *A Matter of Time*, in comparison to '70s Hollywood 'realist' films that are centred, in part, on women and their supportive relations such as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* and *Julia*, displays a much stronger and more rigorous commitment to its feminist position.

The thematics of identity-transformation, creative/sexual self-expression and performance as a life-style are present in most of Minnelli's films. But, as I said earlier, with *A Matter of Time*, he confronts these thematics more directly and, it can be argued, more personally than in any of his previous films. Particularly, at the moment, I am thinking of Minnelli's use of the concept of performance and, by extension, its relation to film as a form of 'spectacle.' Spectacle, in Minnelli's films, has no connections to the Cecil B. de Mille-type film which features a 'cast of thousands' or to the more recent concept of the 'spectacle film' which depends on technological sophistication and an emphasis on special effects. Instead, the spectacle found in a Minnelli film isn't incompatible with intimacy. In fact, it involves the heightening of an emotional response a character experiences through an 'excessive' visualization of the feeling or mood. It is the dramatization of the subjective and reflects Minnelli's stylistic association to the German Expressionist tradition. In *A Matter of Time*, Nina's transformation involves both self-acceptance and a realization of her ability to perform. As a performer, Nina can continually recreate life—make it as glamorous, exciting and challenging as she wishes it to be. In the film, Nina literally accepts herself as a performer when she sings "Do It Again"—the mode also serves to distinguish her creative forces from the Contessa's. Since the actress playing Nina is Liza Minnelli, who is a recognized singer/actress in real life, both the character and the performer, Minnelli, are expressing their self-identity.

This premise leads to the notion that the film is intended as a self-reflexive statement on the performer/performing in relation to her/his private/public life as an artist/creator. Conceivably, Liza Minnelli as Nina is enacting a concept of her real-life self in relation to the Bergman character who represents her real-life mother (Judy Garland). The Bergman/Garland figure tells Nina/Minelli that she must be an 'original' and that she must establish her own identity—a conflict Liza Minnelli's career has been plagued with. (Pointedly, Minnelli, in singing "Do It Again," makes reference to Garland as the song was often sung by her. But, in contrast to Garland's interpretation, Minnelli produces a moody and sensual rendition.) Yet, Bergman/Garland, an original person, is at this point in time on the verge of madness because of the social-cultural identity/image she has accepted. Her life is one of loneliness and illusory satisfactions that appear to be moments of 'greatness.' This greatness, in actuality, is closer to a form of notoriety. Clearly, the film suggests, Nina/Minnelli needs to be more than an original if she is to survive in 'reality' as a performer.

In real life, Minnelli guided Garland's film stardom for a number of years and here directs their daughter in the same career. In *A Matter of Time*, Vincente Minnelli both celebrates the performer, including his wife and daughter, for being able to accept the challenge of being an extraordinary person, and, at the same time, acknowledges the disillusionment and bitterness that may be involved in being an artist/creator. Ultimately, Minnelli acknowledges and accepts, as all his films testify, the triumph of spectacle. □

# Unspoken and Unsolved: Tell Me A Riddle

by Florence Jacobowitz & Lori Spring

**M**ANY SOCIALIST THEORISTS AND CRITICS IN the '20s and '30s recognized the political potential of Hollywood movies: here was a mass medium of the industrial age that could both express social dissatisfaction and entertain notions of a better world. Brecht and Benjamin, amongst others, insisted that politically effective art should be popular, accessible and pleasurable. Today 'materialist' film theorists and critics, ostensibly committed to social change, are still debating the viability of these hopes, and have produced a number of widely differing positions.

The most extreme or 'purist' of these positions, championed in particular by a number of feminists, rejects the Hollywood style of Realism and the industry's still largely studio conglomerate control of distribution and exhibition; instead, they look to the 'avant-garde' and other alternative forms of film production, distribution and exhibition. Realism is rejected as a mystificatory style which seamlessly conceals its formal devices in order to invisibly direct viewer response along an ideologically-safe projectile. This position maintains that Hollywood has perpetuated images of women that cater to masculine pleasure. As a result, women have been alternately objectified, fetishized, worshipped or destroyed, according to the desires/needs of the male spectator. These feminists suggest that women must find new stylistic modes to accommodate feminist images of women. Whether or not one disagrees with the above, one undeniable consequence of the total rejection of Hollywood Realism is the accompanying loss of a large audience—in terms of political effect, a major loss.

Other theorists/critics are more willing to recognize the progressive potential of Realist art, however ultimately constrained it may be by the interests in power. This group claims that within certain Realist filmic genres spectator response is not entirely contained and determined. The audience can be distanced from the narrative world through a heightening of formal/aesthetic elements of style beyond what is necessary to maintain an illusion of reality, in such a manner that thematic elements are foregrounded and parallels between the fictional world and the world outside of the movie theatre are strongly suggested. The extreme lighting of film noir or the emotional crescendoes of the melodrama and the visual iconography suggesting entrapment are examples (and one can think of numerous others from the musical, the western, the horror film) of this manner of subversion. The melodrama is of particular interest to feminist critics as it was directed to female spectatorship. Films within these genres can be distinguished from those within others which may also employ stylistic extremes in the form of fantastic locales (for example, certain science fiction films, like *Star Wars*, or adventure films, like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*) but fail to suggest that these alternate worlds are in any way related to social reality.<sup>1</sup>

Another area of attention has been the 'incoherent' text—a term used to describe films which, while outwardly satisfying the strictures and demands of the political system within which they are produced, remain riddled with contradictions which often work to subvert the films' overt, ideologically-acceptable project. It is often unclear by what mechanisms these subversive impulses manage to erupt within a system which works to contain them: it has generally

been more acceptable in the milieu of radical criticism to claim that they surface unintentionally, as censored impulses do in dreams, to the surprise of the dreamer/creator; it is less appropriate to suggest that these messages may also have been intentionally articulated in part or whole, in the films of such male 'bourgeois' directors as Ophuls, Von Sternberg or Scorsese.

There is a group of films within mainstream narrative art yet to be accounted for. How does one rationalize or explain works which are within the Hollywood aesthetic but which appear to be making no attempt to satisfy any externally-imposed social/aesthetic strictures, which are not particularly noteworthy in terms of stylistic 'excess' (in the sense of employing conventions and elements of style as distancing devices), and which seem entirely *too* conscious and consistent in their raising of political issues to be labelled incoherent?

Aptly named, *Tell Me a Riddle* is one of these films which crop up within a patriarchal/bourgeois film industry. The film is not entirely anomalous, nor is it divorced from the venerable stylistic and generic traditions of Hollywood—but it does signal change and raises issues generally ignored in popular representational art. We would like to suggest that films like *Tell Me a Riddle* reformulate, expand, and evolve generic possibilities by offering different kinds of images than those long perpetuated in mainstream culture. By operating within these parameters, the film neither relinquishes the communicative modes of popular narrative Realist film nor compromises its intentions to communicate fundamental issues of gender/class/ethnicity to a large audience often deprived of significant images which mirror their experiences. The film attests to the possibility that Hollywood Realist film can both express social criticism and articulate the desire for change, and in so doing, pave the way for such change in the concrete world by affecting consciousness.

The fact that the film was directed by a woman does not entirely account for its elements of difference. We will not elaborate upon Lee Grant's and the production company's difficulties in seeing the project come to fruition. There have been a number of articles on women directors in Hollywood describing their struggles within a very masculine industry and within a society which generally will not risk large sums of money on women (and certainly never on projects as unbankable as this one in terms of subject matter). Clearly the woman's discourse can in part be attributed to Lee Grant's efforts, to Tillie Olsen's novella *Tell Me a Riddle*, and to the input of the feminist collective of Godmother Productions. However just as often, women directors and writers, like women spectators, produce and consume patriarchal discourses without disturbance, having largely come to internalize an image of themselves dictated by a male dominant society. Films about female experience are too often tossed aside by spectators and critics unfamiliar with (or uninterested in) the 'Other' side of difference—both in terms of gender experience and class experience. Feminist/socialist critics have placed a high priority on filling in the gaps of experience either suppressed or ignored in our culture, having become aware that the inability to conceptualize change, and to articulate the experiences of Other-ness, has been a major factor in ensuring the maintenance of the status quo.

*Tell Me a Riddle* touches on the kinds of issues, associations, memories and stories which receive little, if any, attention on the



***Tell Me a Riddle:*** Jeannie (Brooke Adams) and David (Melvyn Douglas) enact the ritual celebration promised to Eva.

Hollywood screen. The film tells the story of an elderly couple and their struggle to assert differing concepts of their future together. David/Melvin Douglas, the husband, feels overwhelmed by the maintenance needs of their familial home, and by their continual struggle to make ends meet. He wants to spend his remaining years with his friends and co-workers in a retirement home in Florida, called 'Union Haven.' Eva/Lila Kedrova, the wife, wishes to remain in her house: the familiarity of what was for so many years a place of domestic confinement has ultimately become a source of solace for her, a place of solitude and retreat. As the narrative progresses, it is revealed to all except Eva (ironically, an additional exclusion from the social world) that she is dying of cancer. As a result, David sells their house without Eva's knowledge or consent in order to finance their final journey together so that Eva may see, and unwittingly say farewell to, their various children and grandchildren. The journey assumes a metaphoric resonance as well, as Eva and David confront their walls of resentment and move towards an understanding based on the equal consideration of their mutual needs.

One can already note the differences in the issues the film investigates from those otherwise treated in popular mainstream culture. Not since the 1937 McCarey film, *Make Way for Tomorrow*, has Hollywood released a serious dramatic film concerning the needs and desires of the elderly coupled with the reality of borderline poverty.<sup>2</sup> In neither film are the hero and heroine typical figures of identification, being neither young nor particularly sexually attractive in the conventional sense. Yet *Tell Me a Riddle* does not stop there. In it, both Eva and David reminisce about their youthful ideals in the Socialist movement in both Russia and America. Although the film's allusions to their Socialist allegiances are quite subtle, there are enough clear references made to establish their ideological history. Not only are these central protagonists elderly, poor, and vaguely socialist, they are also Russian Jewish immigrants, an additional element of 'Otherness.' Although the film is about both Eva and David, the central character investigated in the narrative, the more problematic protagonist, is Eva; and part of this problematic, aside from the issue of her illness (which is never exploited as it is in other Hollywood movies dealing with fatal illnesses<sup>3</sup>), is her exclusion from active participation in the masculine world of intellectual activity and social politics, and her entrapment in the confined sphere of what society deems the feminine.

This theme of exclusion, along with that of entrapment, links the concerns of *Tell Me a Riddle* with those of the melodrama (referring here to both the literary and cinematic traditions). The problematic of the melodrama includes the expression of women's resistance to their confined and subordinated positions in a male-dominated world. This 'expression of resistance,' whether conscious or unconscious, takes many forms. One of the most celebrated in the melodrama is that of rebellion through adultery (whether consummated or wished for) as in quintessential melodramas such as *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. Another manifestation of resistance to the inequalities inherent in the gender-determined division of labor is the heroine's withdrawal: "For them, inwardness alone provides transcendence, and their world within has heroic dimensions."<sup>4</sup> In order to protest their exclusion, these heroines often withdraw into a world which, ironically, increases their isolation and oppression.

In *Tell Me a Riddle*, Eva protests her exclusion by moving inward—not into an interior world of romantic obsession in the more conventional sense of the genre, but into an 'adulterous' relationship with her memories, her 'friends' (her books and photographs), the remnants of the world she has lost access to. The film avoids equating the male protagonist with patriarchy: as in many of the most significant melodramas, her husband David is a victim of the same social system which oppresses Eva. In the words of Tillie

Olsen's novella, "... he remembered she had not always been isolated, had not always wanted to live alone... But again he could reconstruct, image, nothing of what had been before, or when, or how, it had changed."<sup>5</sup>

The battle the film describes is not easily reduced to male versus female, husband versus wife, but elaborates itself against the larger social background of the gender-determined division of labor, and economic inequality. As suggested in the novella's opening ("... How deep back the stubborn, gnarled roots of the quarrel reached, no one could say"), the quarrel is rooted in the fundamentals of gender and class.

As much as the film encourages one to identify and empathize with Eva (we see *her* memories, *her* associations and no one else's), she is simultaneously portrayed as a victim of her own oppression.<sup>6</sup> Although one hasn't yet met Eva, the opening images of the film—photographs from her past—align one with her sphere. As one sees these photographs—some of a man with a young girl (likely Eva), images of Eva as a young woman with her comrades—one hears the sounds of a child humming, some instrumental Russian folk music, and a voice calling "Eva!" These images are followed by pictures of immigrants coming to America (to the sound of boat whistles) and a photo of Eva as a young mother. This collage from the past ends with an abrupt cut to the present: elderly feet moving along a porch, followed by images of a woman's domestic labor—laundry, vacuuming. A man is seen walking across a railway yard, slowly negotiating the steep front stairs of a large house. David's voice asks, "What do we need all this for? Seven rooms . . .", while Eva puts on her scratchy Russian records at a high volume (to both hear and close out) and proceeds to examine her photo album—images of Gorky, Hugo, Voltaire, Chekhov—and is visibly content. The image cuts to David trying to climb a ladder; a low-angle shot from David's point of view makes the ladder seem endless. He knocks on the window of the porch where Eva is sitting, enclosed within the panes of glass (a common visual motif of entrapment within the melodrama, of which Max Ophuls, for example, makes use). "I'm too old for this," he proclaims. "It's a sinking ship." Eva's response is to close the door, to further enclose herself within her own space. "My books are my friends," she tells herself, and the scene cuts to the film's actual flashbacks: images of Eva and another young woman reading in the woods. Eva's reverie is interrupted by David's "Where is my TV guide? . . . anyway, I'm selling the house." Eva moves towards the TV, blocking the screen, as she proclaims, "You cannot sell this house." (Throughout the scene one hears bits of the soundtrack of the TV documentary David has been watching: in reference to "female rhinos and their young cubs," the announcer comments, "Roger is eager to see how they adapt to their temporary captivity.") The oppositions in the struggle are laid out: Eva's insistence on remaining in a house in which, although she is visualized as being 'captive,' she can choose to withdraw to the privacy of her inward world; and David's wish to sell a house which he can no longer maintain and in which he feels isolated from both his wife and the outside world.

Eva's insistence hinges on her need to remain in the space familiar to her, however imprisoning. Her memories indicate that she resents her imprisonment. Later, on the night described above, David's request to turn out the light is linked to a cut to Eva's memory of a young man (presumably David) gently touching Eva, as a young woman, as she reads in bed. His soft words ("Don't read, not now") pull her away from her books to the opposing world of children—sexual relations, without birth control, almost inevitably result in babies and therefore further exclusion, an endless circularity which isolates Eva from her own needs relating to the outside world as represented in her books. Eva resents the steady consumption of *her* time, her need to relax, and insists on using the present to indulge in the past she has lost. David resents Eva's introversion ("Are you on

or off?" he continually asks, in reference to the hearing aid which she frequently turns off, shutting him out), just as Eva has always resented his connections to the world outside—his card games, his leisure to joke and entertain. Eva never has experienced the leisure afforded men; as she tells her grandchildren, she knows no riddles—it seems she has never had the time for anything beyond immediate and pressing domestic demands.

During a family dinner, Eva defends her wish to remain in the house by telling her family, "I can't live with people anymore." "But Mama," her daughter protests, "you've lived your whole life for people." "Not with . . . many different things now." "Then live alone!" David retorts. This is a constant battle reiterated throughout. In Olsen's words, "She would not exchange her solitude for anything. Never again to be forced to move to the rhythms of others. For in this solitude she had won to a reconciled peace."

When visiting her youngest daughter Vivi, Eva turns away from holding her newborn grandchild. "I can't," she protests. The moment is followed by memories of herself as a young mother lying in bed, her husband's arms holding out a baby while she turns her face away, resentful, refusing. The following shot is of Eva nursing, but instead of offering the archetypal image of joyous sustenance, the feeling is one of being drained, of having demands imposed which are resented. Again, in Olsen's words, "A new baby. How many warm, seductive babies . . . warm flesh like this that had claims and nuzzled away all else and with lovely mouths devoured . . . ." Eva cannot listen to her children reminiscing of her duties as a mother—the food she cooked, the dresses she sewed: "Too much past, Vivi. I just don't remember." She doesn't want to remember.

Painful memories are evoked for Eva as she watches her grandson playing atop a 'jungle jim': we see flashback images of Cossack guards outside of the jail cell in which she and another woman are being held. The sequence continues, intercutting between Eva lying in bed remembering and the flashbacks which culminate in the image of her friend, Lisa, hanging. Eva wakes up in a sweat and David soothes: "No prison, Omaha." Still in Omaha, Eva again relives her prison experience in a sequence which ends with her granddaughter discovering her huddled in a closet: "Are you hiding here too, Grandma?" Eva's memories of her imprisonment in the 'old country' as a result of political oppression (due either to her socialist activities or her status as a Jew or perhaps both) constantly interrupt her feeling of oppression and entrapment in the 'new world' resulting from her role as mother combined with her battle to feed and clothe her children. Eva never stops reliving her prison experience as long as she still feels imprisoned, isolated and ghettoized by the demands of domestic and reproductive labor. In describing the divisions of working class along gender lines in the Soviet Union, Varda Burstyn comments: "imploding discontent and alienation prevents the full demonstration of resistance."<sup>7</sup> This concept can be applied to women's feelings of alienation in any society. *Implosion* prevents resistance and leads to internal breakdown. In Andrew Britton's article on Ophuls' melodrama, *Madame De . . .*, he discusses the illness of the central protagonist, Louise. Patronizingly indulged at first, "her illness becomes a metaphor for the systematic impoverishment and curtailment of emotional resources and allegiances produced by Louise's oppression."<sup>8</sup> One can similarly read Eva's degenerative illness as a manifestation of her body succumbing to stress and physical exploitation. Following Eva's initial visit to the doctor, before the results revealing the gravity of Eva's illness have come in, her daughter-in-law reprovingly reports to David that Eva was told to "start living like a human being." Her family cannot understand that Eva has never been afforded that luxury.

The 'gnarled roots of the quarrel' between David and Eva originate in the sexual division of labor and economic/class divisions, the interconnectedness of which the film insists upon throughout.

Both Eva and David were Jewish socialists, active in the Russian revolution, or at least in the task of raising political consciousness against oppression in Russia. The film goes on to suggest that these ideals followed them to America. David talks of organizing the Union Haven retirement home and later comments that Eva has him "organizing again"—advocating rent controls in their friend, Mrs. Mays', apartment building. Eva's contemporary experience of racial/class oppression in San Francisco is evident in scenes in which she walks past Chilean murals commemorating freedom and independence. These murals recall her memories of past oppression. David and Eva's economic struggles are stressed throughout: Eva's fight to feed and clothe their family during the depression; the humiliation of having to scrounge for day-old bread and soup bones; their recent struggles to keep up their house and finally now, the pressures of meeting medical expenses and the cost of the visits to their children.

Perhaps the clearest indication of gender and economic oppression, coupled with the oppression of the elderly in a youth-oriented society, is embodied in the plight of Mrs. Mays/Lili Valenty, the old friend Eva rediscovers in San Francisco. Her husband has passed away, her family has grown up and she is no longer socially relevant. The first shot of Mrs. Mays—rifling through trash bins in the background of the image—arouses middle-class sentiments of pity mixed with indifference and perhaps mild disgust. Lee Grant brilliantly foregrounds the prejudices informing this response by immediately transforming the anonymous 'bag lady' into an important character in the remaining narrative. The sequence in which Mrs. Mays invites David and Eva home for tea is startling in its explicit critique of the exploitation of the elderly. She describes her apartment as being near "where they show the porno movies." As Eva and David approach Mrs. Mays' apartment, she apologizes for the elevator being out of order. As they breathlessly "rest and climb" to the top, she admits that it is always out of order. She mentions the rent hikes due to minor "renovations" and goes on to explain that the cans she collects earn her 21¢ a pound, "nothing to sniff at." As her fridge has broken down, she explains that she treats herself to 65¢ meals at the 'Centre,' although "the food's not good." As she excuses herself to go to the washroom down the hall, Eva nearly collapses, unable to breathe, sputtering, ". . . a lifetime of rooms . . . now only one room . . . no room . . . can't talk . . . eight children and now only one room."

Images of old age, poverty, and neglect connected to an elderly female are the realization of all of Eva's fears: after years of devoted domestic labor (eight children) and isolation from the social world of production (Mrs. Mays' husband died of a heart attack; hence she is no longer connected to that world), women are neglected, shut away in apartments like these, collecting reusable refuse. The entire Mrs. Mays sequence is one which underlines the film's thematic of constriction, confinement, airlessness. One might describe the film as being structured around the movement from the vocal, active past through the airless, repressed present towards the future—marked by the moments in which Eva rediscovers her 'voice' and can reciprocate again in her relationships with David, with Jeannie, her granddaughter, and with her friend, Mrs. Mays. The motif of airlessness and suffocation is linked with spatial confinement throughout. Near the beginning of the film, when Eva and David are still in their own home, David wakes up in the middle of the night and finds Eva outside during a rainstorm, ecstatically singing an old Russian love song. "David, I can breathe now, my lungs are filled with air." Mrs. Mays' room, which reminds Eva of a coffin, re-evokes her fear of being unable to breathe, of imprisonment.

The sequences in San Francisco mark a significant turning point in Eva's life. She develops two important relationships (primarily one with Jeannie/Brooke Adams, but also with Mrs. Mays), and she begins to emerge from her inner space into the outside world.



***Tell Me a Riddle: David (Melvyn Douglas) and Eva (Lila Kedrova) in the 'Freiheit' scene.***

The transition is marked by her increasing ability to vocalize her sentiments and to confront and share elements of her past which she has secretly guarded. This transition is visualized by a use of space which is open and unrestrictive: Jeannie's airy loft, walks along the Pacific and picnics by the sea. One day, while walking with David, Eva rushes through an arched passageway (the walls of which are sprayed with the graffiti message: "Smash Racism"), kicks off her shoes and frolics in the wide open Pacific. In another scene, Eva, Mrs. Mays and Jeannie are having a picnic in the sunshine by the sea. Jeannie is rollerskating, an activity which subtly underlines her mobility, her freedom, her positive outlook. It is the first time that Eva is heard openly and willingly describing her past: "So I said to my father, why can't I go to school? My brothers go to school . . . I lived with my father, a man of God. He said, 'A woman is a footstool for a man.' So I run to Lisa and she teaches me how to read." Jeannie proceeds to share the news of her break-up with the man she has been living with and ends up proclaiming, "I'm gonna live! Here I am! I survived!" The sequence beautifully illustrates the growing support these women offer one another. In later sequences Jeannie and Mrs. Mays are seen massaging and comforting Eva through her illness. On another occasion at the seashore with Jeannie, Eva says, "To think what is beyond . . . Korea, China . . . Geography, I could just eat it up." These moments are significant in the way they reflect Eva's renewed interest in the world outside of the domestic realm.

One can discern two clearly-related narratives in the film, the turning point of each beginning when David regretfully confesses he has sold their house. One narrative line entails the conflict over the sale of the house marked by Eva's desire to return to her home and her inability to do so; the more profound narrative line involves Eva's emergence from confinement into relative freedom prior to her death. Ironically, what seems a loss in the more overt narrative (that of the sale of the house) turns out to be an important victory in the more general struggle. Eva learns that her home is not equivalent to her domestic/familial house, and that the moments of satisfaction she previously enjoyed inwardly can now be shared with and passed on to others.

The sequence following David's revelation of having sold the house is one of attempted reconciliation. On the eve of Mrs. Mays' birthday party, David offers Eva a flower which she outwardly rejects, then sniffs appreciatively. Eva asserts her desire to attend the party even though she is feverish. The party reawakens images of her past. The master of ceremonies/accordionist dedicates some songs to the Jewish-Russian immigrants, victims of "pogroms" (anti-Semitic attacks). He begins to dance with Eva, wheeling her in her chair. The familiar music transports her back to Olshana, her hometown, where she sees herself (in intercut flashbacks) as a child, dancing to these same tunes. As the politically-evocative music continues, Eva suddenly stops, attempts to get up, and cries out, "Freiheit! Freiheit!" The scene cuts to Eva's memory of herself,

clasping her friend/comrade's hands, delivering a rousing speech ending with these cries for freedom, but in her present, older voice. The moment in which Eva shouts 'freedom' signifies an important change—the world remembered finally breaks through to the present. Eva's assertions of freedom overwhelm her earlier memories of imprisonment. She no longer represses her demands to be politically/socially active and her voice rings out in strength. It is not suggested as an 'embarrassing incident' for either Eva or David. The scene following, in Jeannie's apartment, continues their mutual outpouring of much which has been withheld for so long. As Eva and David share a cup of tea, their reconciliation continues. David offers to have Eva's books sent and Eva replies, "I don't need them . . . it's all here" (pointing to her head). She continues by suggesting that David should go to Union Haven: "You have a right to your own life," and David counters, "What about me? Alone without you, you always leave me." "How do I leave you?" "You shut off your hearing. You go inside you. Back to Olshana. To your books. Books, books, always your books. I don't know how I'd bear it without my comrade. My enemy. My girl. You're the only one who knew me when I was a boy . . ." At this point, Eva, murmuring his name, approaches David. The scene cuts back to the recurring images of Eva's memory of herself as a young woman reading in bed, approached by her husband who whispers "Not now" as he closes her book. It is a flashback the audience has seen a number of times by this point; however, the earlier references all suggested Eva's resentment, in the sense of her lack of time to read, and the inevitable babies that compounded this lack. This time, though, the flashback continues, intercut with the older Eva as initiator, approaching David, comforting, touching and embracing him. They continue their caress during a long take. The image cuts back and forth between the older couple and their youthful counterparts caressing, bridging over time with an embrace.

This sequence, laden with resonances rarely captured on the Hollywood screen, is one of extraordinary beauty. The completion of the embrace has an enormous impact on a number of levels simultaneously: it separates Eva's sexual pleasure from the earlier scenes indicating her resentment of the difficulties of caring for the babies that followed; it visualizes Eva's emergence from behind the walls within which she has enclosed herself; it indicates David's needs—his feelings of loss and abandonment by, not the wife/mother, but rather his comrade; and it severs social taboos against depicting the elderly as sensual beings (instead of the more usual association of sexuality with age in the form of lewd satire of such 'abnormal' behavior).

The film never suggests that Eva is cured, either spiritually or physically, or that husband and wife can now continue together without any obstacles and that some permanent order can be imposed. Besides the fact that the 'roots' run deep, the film has continuously laid the framework of the conflict against the larger complex of social systems that oppress people, often without their realization or consciousness. Eva's fears and anxieties are still threatening to her and continue to erupt: fears of the "goy gasse" ('street of gentiles'—probable sites for pogrom)—"No streets like that," David comforts. "No ghetto?" "No ghetto"; flashback images seen during the delirium of the final stages of Eva's illness, of Eva pregnant with their son Arnie (who was killed in Korea), hanging laundry, begging for a quarter to buy day-old bread; fears of being pursued; fleeing and losing her ability to run.

The final movement of the film is towards Eva's inevitable death; however, the narrative does not equate death with defeat. In fact, one might argue that the film not only confronts but celebrates death (transgressing another taboo in a society scrupulously devoted to denying age and death) through Jeannie's inheritance of the principles her grandmother has lived for and perhaps died for.<sup>9</sup> Part of the significance of *Tell Me a Riddle* resides in its reminder

that women's struggles for liberation were not invented in the '70s or even in the Suffragettes' fight for the vote in the early part of this century in the liberal democracies of Britain or America. The film links Eva's struggles in the Socialist movement to concerns that the relatively emancipated Jeannie must still confront. Eva empathizes with Jeannie in her anguish over having had an abortion (a narrative element the film inserts which is absent from the novella): "How could I have another baby I couldn't feed? I know about abortion." Leafing through her book of photographs with Jeannie, Eva introduces Jeannie to her comrade, Lisa, "the one who taught me how to read and how to fight," and to various individuals, mainly writers, telling her, "These people will sustain you," thereby effectively passing on to her granddaughter these sources of sustenance. Jeannie helps Eva regain access to the world around her, through Tai Chi, through the Rosita doll which emblemizes the memory of a child's life, and above all through her companionship (as Jeannie rightly advised Eva upon their first meeting, "I'm a big strong girl. Lean on me, Grandma.").

As in all Realist art, the final images work towards 'closure'—the narrative elements are tied together in an attempt to answer and reconcile the problematic set out at the beginning. However, *Tell Me a Riddle* offers these pleasures of the narrative without restoring the order that was. Eva does not get her house back but then, she has learnt to live beyond its walls. As David examines a sketch Jeannie has made of him and Eva curled up, asleep together in her bed, he offers his eulogy of the woman he loved and respected: "You don't know . . . how she was . . . so eloquent . . . a beautiful young girl surrounded by all those people in the woods . . . all those years, she kept those speeches inside . . ." Unlike so many of the melodramas which end with the heroine's death, Eva's does not leave one paralyzed, immobile, in despair. The film is committed to rekindling those speeches: "She wants to pass it on," Jeannie explains, as does the film, in a most eloquent, communicable manner, and in this way redefines the limits of the genre of the melodrama.

*Tell Me a Riddle* utilizes the accessible, pleasurable modes of popular narrative art to articulate the most fundamental experiences of sex, gender and class. By representing a woman's dreams, fears and memories, the film begins to fill a huge vacuum in mainstream representation. As feminists have theorized, these seemingly small personal experiences are profoundly political. By exposing images, voices and narratives long suppressed and silenced, the film reformulates and stretches the possibilities of expression within a language familiar to the viewing audience, attesting to the possibility of producing art which is both popular and politically significant. □

### Footnotes

1. See Andrew Britton's upcoming article in *Movie* 31/32, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment," and Robin Wood's article in this issue of *CineAction!*, for an elaboration of these ideas.
2. *Harry and Tonto* (1974) and *Going in Style* (1979) do address some of these issues, although more within the conventions of comedy.
3. Compare, for instance, *Terms of Endearment* (1983).
4. Andrew Britton quotes from James Walton's "Caleb Williams and the Novel Form" (*Salzburg Studies in English Literature* No. 47, Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1975) in "Mimesis and Metaphor in *Madame de*", *Movie* 29/30, p. 104.
5. Olsen, Tillie, *Tell Me a Riddle* (London: Faber and Faber), p. 21.
6. In Britton's article cited in footnote 4, he makes the same argument in reference to Louise, the protagonist in Ophüls' melodrama, *Madame de*. He discusses the spectator's inability to condone her "morbid withdrawal into romantic despair" (p. 107).
7. Burstyn, Varda, "Masculine Dominance and the State" (*The Socialist Register*, 1983, pp. 45-89), p. 71.
8. Britton, Andrew, *Op. Cit.*, p. 107.
9. It is interesting to note that the film greatly elaborates on the character of Jeannie as she is depicted in the novella, in order to stress this continuance.

# Death Watch: in camera Power



**Death Watch: Catherine (Romy Schneider) and Roddy (Harvey Keitel) on their journey from civilization.**

by Maureen Judge

**A**LTHOUGH BERTRAND TAVERNIER, THE DIRECTOR of *Death Watch*, originally tried to produce the film within the Hollywood system, he was ultimately turned down and forced to seek funding elsewhere. As a result, *Death Watch* became a French/German co-production, filmed in English with an international cast.

*Death Watch* is ostensibly a science fiction film, set sometime in the near future, where machines write novels, death by disease has been virtually eliminated, and the possibility of a human video camera has finally been realized. However, by almost completely excluding gadgetry, electronic music and futuristic settings and costumes, the film does not conform to the conventions of science fiction. Instead, a historical past is injected into *Deathwatch* with a vengeance.

*Death Watch* was filmed on-location in Glasgow, a city of huge cavernous and dilapidated Victorian structures, and in the lush countryside of Scotland. In the opening scene, a camera sweeps over a cemetery where an unidentified young girl is playing amid the gravestones; a speck of life among the dead. Looming in the distance is the Victorian skyline. Throughout the film, the central characters are similarly dwarfed and engulfed by the decayed urban landscape whether it is Roddy/Harvey Keitel aimlessly wandering the city streets, or Catherine Mortenhoe/Romy Schneider negotiat-

ing her way through the interiors of old buildings. The future depicted in *Death Watch* is neither hi-tech nor peopled by heroes capable of restoring life to a decaying order. It is rather one which has its roots in our own contemporary civilization; where the individual finds her/himself overwhelmed by the injustices of society.

Tavernier exposes the utopian ideal of the highly mechanized society that is often associated with science fiction as empty and perverse rhetoric. Concentrating on network television as an agent directly responsible for the creation and propagation of false images, the film portrays TV as an accomplice to the institution of patriarchy and reveals the supportive function it plays in upholding the status quo.

In a close-up profile shot we are introduced to Roddy, a TV director. As lights are shined on his face from machines operated by off-screen scientists and doctors, the accompanying dialogue explains that these experimenters have implanted video cameras in Roddy's eyes. Initially, Roddy is ecstatic about his extended vision. He can now covertly watch anything before him, record it instantaneously, and it will be forever on tape (the ultimate documentary). Roddy's hidden cameras are put to immediate use when he is assigned the job of taping the last days of a dying woman, Catherine Mortenhoe, for "Death Watch," a new network show. Roddy befriends Catherine, travels with her, and secretly records her movements.

Within the framework of the film we witness Roddy in the process of shooting the TV show. However, it is only on rare occasions that we see Roddy openly performing his role as a director: early on in the film Roddy is shown verbally directing a group of children in a playground; and a few scenes later, his position is reinforced when, after spending his first night with Catherine in a mission, he telephones the TV network and advises them which shots of Catherine they should use for the series from the material he has taped. Once Roddy and Catherine begin their journey together he keeps his hidden cameras a well-guarded secret. Although, due to his implants, Roddy's recording activities are obscured to Catherine, Tavernier foregrounds them for us through such structural devices as: 1) Parallel Action—There are sequences in which the film cuts from a full frame shot of Catherine to the inside of the network studio where a simultaneous video playback of that same shot held is seen on the monitors. The implication here is that Roddy, with his camera/eyes, is responsible for the image on the monitors. And this in turn reveals that the source of the image (i.e., the full frame shot of Catherine) had to have been filmed from Roddy's point of view. Because of the real-time continuum that is maintained in the cross-cutting of these shots, we not only catch Roddy engaged in the act of taping Catherine, but we see the evidence on the monitors; 2) Position—At times, literally mimicking Roddy's actions, Tavernier places the camera where the lens, looking through windows, open doors and into mirrors, spies on Roddy's spying; and 3) Voice-over narration—Similar to Tavernier's watchful camera is the film's sporadic off-screen narration by Tracy/Therese Liotard, Roddy's

(ex)wife. Her voice-over ranges from a third person account of the events in the film to a first person reflection of Roddy's actions. (In this respect, *Death Watch* is essentially Tracy's narrative.)

As a result of these structural devices, we find ourselves watching Catherine's journey and her relationship with Roddy unfold, while at the same time watching Roddy tape, and as a corollary, interpret from his point of view, the same events for the TV show within the film.

Without the intermediary of Roddy's camera/eyes, Catherine is shown literally signing her life away to NTV with a legal contract, and then subsequently breaking the commitment. She refuses to allow the privacy of her death become a public spectacle. Leaving the decaying city behind, Catherine disguises herself, goes underground, and joins the dispossessed. There she encounters a fringe element that is strictly controlled by 'the establishment,' (i.e., the police, organized religion, etc. which still wield the social power). Under these conditions it is hardly surprising that the TV network has little trouble locating Catherine in a Salvation Army-like mission, where she meets Roddy and naively allows him to accompany her. With Catherine charting their course, the two eventually make their way out into the open and unscathed countryside, travelling to Landsend, the home of Catherine's ex-husband, Gerald Mortenhoe/Max Von Sydow. Mortenhoe, living in a self-imposed exile, has disentangled himself from society's web. Significantly, Catherine has never discarded her first husband's family name, in spite of a second marriage, and her decision to actively seek out Mortenhoe is symbolic of her own quest for freedom.

However, the narrative that we see Roddy covertly weave around Catherine differs from the essence of Catherine's odyssey. As an agent of NTV, Roddy's story mirrors the needs and expectations of the network. Believing that he can get at death through Catherine, Roddy dramatizes the physical anguish of her illness; he deceptively chronicles her flight as a journey into death rather than seeing it as a struggle against oppression and a journey into freedom. In the eyes of Roddy and his producer, Vincent/Harry Dean Stanton, Catherine's rebellious behavior is strictly a personality trait that will add an extra element of drama for the TV audience. When Vincent first sees Catherine he comments that "She won't die easily" and Roddy enthusiastically responds with the statement, "She's perfect."

Catherine's impending death is a curiosity for the network producers and TV viewers alike. In *Death Watch*, where medicine is supposed to have cured the malady of sickness, and old age is secreted away in nursing homes, the taboo of death is stronger than ever. As Vincent notes, "It is today's pornography." Catherine's illness disrupts the illusion of eternity that the society has so carefully constructed, and her acceptance of death places her in an uncontrollable and therefore forbidden terrain. Told she is dying, Catherine momentarily reacts with shocked disbelief and then quickly resigns herself to her fate. She tells her doctor, "I'll just do it. I don't need to know how to say it."

The program, "Death Watch," provides both a means of taming Catherine and of packaging her death in such a way that it does not disturb society's myths. Her illness is made over by Roddy into yet another consumer product that is advertised on billboards and broadcast on television. A gratified young woman explains to Roddy as she watches the show, that she stays tuned because it makes her cry. Vincent contends that the program has the highest ratings ever achieved by the network and although 37 per cent of the viewers find it offensive, they keep watching it anyway.

Ironically, it is Catherine's decision to sign the contract with NTV that legitimizes the network's abusive powers to program "Death Watch," and tenuously places Roddy's spying within the confines of the law and Catherine's rebellious flight as outside of it. Situating the characters thus, the film makes a mockery of the legal system by revealing its injustice towards Catherine. It is only as a result of the

coercive tactics exerted upon Catherine that she finds herself forced to submit to their contractual agreement. Even before she has consented to the program, Roddy is shown surreptitiously taping her, and billboards of Catherine, announcing "Death Watch—The Ultimate Adventure," are seen plastered all over the city. Catherine makes the agreement in a last ditch effort to temporarily appease the media, arranging a 36-hour reprieve during which she intends to escape from their clutches. She is also tempted by NTV's offer of money, as a means of providing for her present and rather cowardly husband, who otherwise would be left penniless after she dies.

*Death Watch* rejects the notion that one can escape from power by negotiating with it. Although Roddy is directly responsible for Catherine's victimization we see him exploited by those very same powers which coerce Catherine into a binding contract. Essentially he too is bought by 'the system' to produce the TV show although in a less obvious manner (a promotion which includes additional salary).

Throughout the film, Roddy's exploitation is recognizable: after he has been implanted with video cameras a nurse asks him, "Why did you let them do this to you?"; Roddy, erroneously imprisoned in a police cell because he cannot properly identify himself, experiences incredible pain when the necessary light source for his implants is cut off; and when he attempts to make love to his ex-wife Tracy, he recoils, remembering that his cameras are always on and his actions, therefore, always monitored.

Roddy's vision is literally confined by 'the system' and he cannot immediately see himself as its pawn. With implants that require a constant source of light, Roddy is unable to sleep and enter the dream state where active bonds are broken with the external world and private new worlds discovered. Throughout most of the film, Roddy's consciousness remains in the present tense; he is constantly on-duty, supporting and reinforcing society's myths. He does, however, begin to feel uneasy about his task as his intimacy with Catherine grows. Nevertheless, Roddy only fully realizes the injustices committed against both himself and Catherine when he steps out of his corroborative role with NTV and, distanced from that activity, reflects upon it.

Before the final stretch of the journey to Landsend, Roddy goes into a small town to purchase some make-up for Catherine who would like to freshen up prior to her reunion with Mortenhoe. In a momentary gesture of selfless love, Roddy also buys, as a gift, a new dress for Catherine. On his way back to their 'hide-out' in the country, he stops in a bar to watch, for the second time in the film, the TV broadcast of "Death Watch." Due to the time delay between his taping and the program's airing, Roddy finds himself in the self-reflexive posture of re-viewing his own images and actions. And, at this point our privileged position as a spectator of Roddy's covert actions is shared with Roddy. As Roddy watches, holding the gift for Catherine in his hands, he is overwhelmed by both guilt stemming from his deceptive relationship with Catherine, and anger when he realizes that he has been used as an instrument by NTV to spy on Catherine. Roddy becomes cognizant of the fact that he has had no power over the images he recorded and that his only reason for being with Catherine was due to the implants which were bestowed on him by society for its own ends. Roddy leaves the bar, and in a moment of utter anguish, self-sacrifice and ultimate sabotage, tosses away his penlight in the blackness of the night and blinds himself. Although Roddy cannot destroy those images which have already been taped, by blinding himself he prevents his further involvement in the production of the program.

By the time Catherine and Roddy reach Landsend they have become relatively free of their society. Now blind, Roddy is no longer an accomplice to NTV and as a result, of no use to them. In turn, Catherine is liberated from Roddy's gaze and reunited with Gerald Mortenhoe. Only those characters outside of the traditional

patriarchal power structure are able to be free of its hold. With the exceptions of Mortenhoe and now Roddy, these characters are women who have not yet been co-opted by patriarchy. They include: the nurse (a role that has been conventionally thought of as both female and subservient) who understands and tries to bring to Roddy's attention the significance of his implants by asking him, "Why did you let them do this to you?"; and later, an angel-like woman who spends her nights in bars and knowingly offers Roddy salvation through her love which he is unable to accept. But Roddy, at these points in the film, is still operating within the power structure of his society and remains unaltered by the chance encounters.

Another woman who perceives Roddy's exploitation is Tracy, Roddy's ex-wife, also shown to be located outside of 'the system'; in this case, by her conscious refusal to collude with the power elite. Immediately after Roddy has the cameras implanted, he visits Tracy and offers her the money he has obtained from his 'promotion.' Tracy argues against accepting the money, saying she perceives Roddy as Vincent's tool and by taking the cash she would be condoning his relationship with NTV. Although Tracy does not take up a lot of film time, she nonetheless figures prominently in the story, both off-screen as its narrator and on as Roddy's 'lost' moral conscious. And it is Tracy who, with her sight intact, will aid and join with Roddy in the pursuit of a new future outside of society. In the last shot of the film, reunited with Tracy, Roddy introduces her to Gerald Mortenhoe: "I'd like you to meet my wife," he says, significantly leaving off the prefix 'ex.'

In much the same manner, Gerald Mortenhoe, divorced from Catherine, represents that part of her which is missing, and yet necessary to her for her liberation. However, despite Catherine's reunion with Mortenhoe, she is still under contract to Vincent and

still very useful to him. Without Catherine there can be no ending to "Death Watch." Aware that she has only momentarily escaped from Vincent's scrutiny because of Roddy's self-induced blindness, Catherine, in the freedom of her (ex)husband's shelter, takes control of her own destiny and quietly commits suicide. Like Roddy, she too plays her part in sabotaging the network.

Vincent arrives at Mortenhoe's with a powerful display of strength, swooping down from the sky in a helicopter crowded with co-conspirators (and Tracy). However, because Catherine is already dead, he is no longer able to assume his role as producer. His authority over both Catherine and the program is usurped by a fate beyond his control. Vincent becomes a man with no future since his whole life is tied to the finale of the program; he will undoubtedly lose his position at NTV. It is only fitting that Vincent, as a defeated invader of Mortenhoe's sanctuary, is forced to leave and retreat to the decaying city where his destiny is hopeless and uncertain.

Tavernier wisely chooses to eclipse the film/TV show's climax of Catherine's death with her off-screen suicide. He thus avoids implicating himself in that very activity of duplicity and deception which he has just exposed. Once Catherine has been liberated from Roddy's gaze, under Tavernier's camera she maintains her freedom.

The off-screen suicide also serves to underplay any tragic heroism associated with it. Similarly, Roddy's self-sacrifice is diminished by the fact that when he throws away the penlight, he tries to retrieve it, but by the time it is found he is already blind. By undercutting the heroic stature of his characters, Tavernier keeps them outside of 'the system.' For if we perceived Roddy and Catherine as heroes, that would accord them a mythic place within our society, and support the notion that people can affect changes from within its power structure, rather than when they are liberated from it. □

# The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia

by Robin Wood

**S**UPERFICIALLY—AND ESPECIALLY TO ANYONE who hadn't seen it—it might seem surprising that *The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia* was a box-office failure. The 'package,' within a cinema targeted increasingly upon the youth audience, seems on paper a highly marketable commodity: a story about young people, and pop singers (Country-and-Western variety) at that; Kristy McNichol at the height of her TV-developed popularity; rising young star Dennis Quaid; sex and violence; title taken from a popular song; throw in Mark 'Luke Skywalker'

Hamill and it would seem you couldn't miss. Yet the film missed by many miles. Part of the problem may indeed have been the marketing, proving again how unwise it is to try to fool your prospective customers: the title (which has nothing whatever to do with the film, except that the action takes place in Georgia and the song is performed over the opening credits) creates expectations of the usual teenage sex romp; those attracted by it were understandably disappointed (and presumably spread the news), those who might have appreciated the film stayed away.

It is in fact in the context of the '80s cycle of 'youth' movies that

the film's distinction becomes most apparent. What progressive potential the youth movies have is clearly centred on their exploitation of the desire to flout or overthrow authority (I take *Porky's* as *locus classicus*). Yet the overthrow, while occasionally exhilarating, is invariably superficial, hence easily recuperable: the nasty authority figures are the easiest of targets (mean teachers, gross policemen, brutalized brothel-keepers), and the films can never confront the obvious fact that the young rebels, totally lacking any political awareness, are destined inevitably to become the next generation of parents. The real subject of the films is 'getting laid,' and (curious as it may seem) the desire to get laid has little, here, to do with sexual pleasure: it is, rather, the essential rite of passage, the token that the teenage male has become a 'real man.' The films (on one level, no doubt, a response to the anxiety generated by the enormous strides the gay movement has taken in the last decade—it is significant that, the occasional homophobic insult apart, homosexuality is never mentioned) appear to mark the point where the remaining traces of the bisexuality Freud perceived to be innate in all of us are finally repressed, the point where the process of 'socialization' is completed and the heterosexual male (the future father) is definitively produced. In other words, the films, superficially celebrating the overthrow of patriarchal authority, are in fact about its reinstatement and perpetuation, always at the expense of women.

Elsewhere in this issue I have argued that the dominant theme of '80s Hollywood cinema is the restoration of the Father and of the structures of the patriarchal organization. The father of *The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia* has blown his brains out long before the film opens, leaving his son Travis (Quaid) and daughter Amanda (McNichol) to work out their own lives. We deduce from the first scenes that, as brother and sister, they have internalized the patriarchal structures, though very uneasily and precariously. Travis, as the male, is understood to have the talent and the future career; he is also an obsessive womanizer, having repeatedly to establish his manhood. Amanda, on the other hand, has cast herself as the one who serves his talent and (grudgingly) indulges his womanizing. Her ambivalence within this self-imposed subservient role is, however, established very swiftly. With her story about Travis' (fictional) infection, she undermines his womanizing (directly) and his success as a performer (indirectly); she is the dominant member of the partnership, in some ways behaving more like a father than a mother; and she retains the large gun (a .357 magnum) with which their father shot himself. Its phallic significance is underlined: as she tells Travis, "It's the only thing I've got of Daddy's . . . I kinda like to touch it under my pillow." As for Travis, cast in the role of father, he "can't even tie a tie," and acknowledges that his self-effacing sister "wrote about half the songs herself." The film is about the intolerable strains the patriarchal structures and expectations impose on human individuals, male and female: hence Amanda's description of herself as "Sixteen going on forty-seven."

It is too simple to describe Amanda's attachment to her brother as incestuous, though that possibility is repeatedly suggested, for example in her jealousy of the women he is attracted to and in the love songs the two sing together. More important is her construction of Travis as her Ideal Ego, the projection of her ideal image of what she inwardly wishes to be: as the male, the firstborn, the 'man of the family,' Travis is the unwilling means whereby she realizes her desires, her aspirations, her talents vicariously. Hence her inability to recognize him as a *person*, an autonomous individual with inclinations quite incompatible with the drives she projects on to him. The film then follows two parallel and interdependent lines of development: the growth of Travis' desire to detach himself from the demands Amanda imposes on him, and Amanda's realization of her own talent and ability, enabling her to begin living out her ambitions in herself and not through a male. In each case, the

development involves the formation of a relationship with a potential lover.

Travis' growing interest in Melody (Sunny Johnson) marks a shift from his habitual use of women as one night stands (presented as relatively innocuous though opportunistic) to a relationship based on caring and mutuality. It also involves him in a triangle with strongly-marked Oedipal connotations. The film in fact produces two contrasting father-figures: Andy, the bar owner, tolerant, constructive and benevolent, and Seth/Don Stroud, the town's deputy sheriff, Melody's owner (self-proclaimed), oppressive and brutal. Having started by beating Travis up and arresting him, he subsequently addresses him as "son" and threatens him with castration ("Your choice is to run, or go through life as a soprano") if he doesn't leave town. The 'father'/'son' confrontation over Melody develops out of Travis' defence of the woman's right to her own choice—Melody being initially ready to acquiesce in her ignominious role as Seth's possession. It culminates in Melody's feeling able to stand up to Seth and commit herself to Travis because the latter *loses* the fight, an interesting reversal of the standard pattern: we are so accustomed to the scene in which the woman walks off with the victor because he has 'proved his manhood' by beating his opponent to a pulp that the film's perception that a woman might be attracted to a man because he is vulnerable, non-oppressive, and a failure at physical violence, comes as quite a surprise. The Oedipal trajectory here ends, not in the son's identification with the father, but in mutual destruction.

Amanda's relationship with Conrad (Mark Hamill) also attempts a renegotiation of male/female roles in the interests of autonomy and equality: as Conrad remarks, "We must be made for each other—we both shoot the same gun." Conrad's position is initially precarious and ambiguous: a cop who doesn't want to be an authority figure, to become 'the father.' At the end of the film, Amanda's new-found freedom and autonomy is suggested by two details: she is able to accept Melody (to whom she earlier reacted with automatic antagonism) and she is able to reject Andy's offer of a small-town home. Given the dominant generic patterns of the '80s, one can work out what the end of the film must be. With the 'bad cop' eliminated, authority must be reinstated, in the person of the 'good cop' (see, recently, the abrupt last-minute recuperation operating in *Heaven Help Us*); therefore, Amanda must realize that she hasn't much future driving off to Nashville (without a licence) to develop an uncertain career as a singer, and must decide to settle down and become the good cop's wife: the film would become a sort of teenage *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. The actual ending, then, totally contradicts expectations. Conrad does indeed drive after Amanda, and use the authority of his police car and siren as a means of stopping her. Having done so, however, he abandons the police car at the side of the road, strips off his uniform, climbs in beside Amanda in his underwear, and makes it clear that he will be her support in her Nashville aspirations.

Clearly, in the context of the '80s youth movie, *The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia* has its problems. It doesn't fit comfortably into any genre (comedy? road movie? musical? melodrama?); in fact, its shifts of tone are very precisely judged, the songs integral to the narrative. It offers a very different version of the 'Oedipal trajectory' from the one demanded by patriarchal culture, the one of which '80s cinema has conditioned us to expect the endless rehearsal. Yet this film surely had an audience, if only its distributors had had the nerve to seek it out. Today, it is as fresh and relevant as when it first appeared. □

**OPPOSITE—*The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia*: Amanda (Kristy McNichol) with 'the only thing I've got of Daddy's.'**



### Contributors

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Neglected  
Films  
of the  
'80s:

**Beat Street**

**Out of the Blue**

**The Night the Lights  
Went Out in Georgia**

**A Matter of Time**

**Tell Me a Riddle**

**Death Watch**

